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**ALIENATION AND RESIGNATION:  
WHY DON'T WE ACT AGAINST APOCALYPTIC FUTURES?**

Master's Thesis in Philosophy

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## Introduction

A specter is haunting us – the specter of apocalypse. In the first half of the 21st century, humanity increasingly sees its future as full of global threats, which could be called apocalyptic because of their scale and of the danger which they impose on humankind. These dangerous perspectives are unique because they are man-made (Hartog 2015). The familiar threat of a nuclear war has increased since the end of the Cold War. The pandemic, which, while not directly created by humans, “stems from humanity’s deteriorating relationship with nature” (Hartog 2020) is already killing millions of people while much more dangerous diseases are predicted to spread in the decades to come. Such threats occupy the imaginary future, and even accelerating technological progress is often perceived as menacing and uncontrollable. Finally, climate change and the environmental collapse are no longer just a possibility, but the reality which continuously becomes worse. If these risks are produced and amplified by humans, why is their existence accepted instead of removing these risks and changing the future which we collectively create?

Moreover, these risks are produced not by simply human activity: they are caused or amplified by the current socio-economic system. It is not just humans who cause these catastrophes, but the way in which they live or are made to live (Moore 2017, 2). Climate change is the result of careless industrial overproduction and ecology is being destabilized by the overexploitation of nature. If humanity faces such a threat, the only logical response to it would be a global collective effort to stop the apocalypse even if the whole way of living is to be changed. Pandemics, while being natural, are dramatically amplified by the character of human society. However, those actions which are being taken are not aimed at removing the root of the problem.

As capitalism is at the center of this question – it causes the catastrophe, limits the response to it, and is to be replaced by something else in order to avoid it – I find it appropriate to search for the answer in Marxism, which for a long time tried to answer why capitalism is so hard to replace. Therefore, the question of the present thesis is such: how absence of sufficient response to the future catastrophes can be explained by Marxist philosophy?

Some of those philosophers who criticized the capitalist mode of production have also devoted their attention to similar questions. For example, Herbert Marcuse in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) demonstrated that the risks of the nuclear war and of technological catastrophes are normalized due to the ideological hegemony of scientific

rationality, which is related to both capitalism and the Enlightenment. According to him, technological progress is detached from its goals – from making human life better – and has become an end in itself (Marcuse 2007, 150). It is seen as something inherently good and the whole civilization is devoted to guaranteeing the growth of the machinery (Ibid, 162). The risks, which are produced by technological progress, are seen as inevitable side-effects of it and are justified by its consumerist benefits. In order to escape this vicious circle, one was supposed to refuse participating in the capitalist system completely in order to break free from its ideological frameworks and to imagine other ways of living.

Another approach was taken by sociologist Ulrich Beck, which was strongly influenced by Marxist philosophy. In his book *Risk Society* (1992), he analyzed the normalization of environmental risks, mostly speaking of pollutants, poisonous chemicals and nuclear power plants. His description was close to the one given by Marcuse – these risks were also perceived as the inevitable part of the industrial production and were supposed to be accepted if one wants to live in a modern world (Beck 1992, 41). In this normalization he blamed scientists who, supporting capital, represent those risks as justified (Ibid, 29). For him, this situation could be overcome if science abandoned and returned to its original principles (Ibid, 155).

Other theorists, such as Guy Debord in the *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988) and Mark Fisher in *Capitalist Realism* (2009) criticized the ideological hegemony of capitalism through the means of culture and mass media. However, these explanations seem to be insufficient when applied to the contemporary situation. All of these authors emphasized that capitalists hide the real scale of capitalism's potential and actual harmful effects in order to protect its ideological image. In reality, harm and risks were supposed to be a contradiction of the capitalist system which, while realized by the people, would demonstrate that capitalism is unsustainable. Hence, they thought people to be simply under-informed and suggested that spreading awareness about these harmful effects was the efficient method of struggling against capitalism. In contrary, nowadays scientists urge people to act against catastrophic risks and even to change the economic system, and the scale of these risks is widely recognized. However, neither capitalism nor catastrophes are confronted with people's global collective action.

Therefore, there should be something else within capitalism in addition to the simple ideological hegemony which discourages people to act. This thesis argues that the absence of sufficient collective action against catastrophic futures can be explained by *alienation*

which is inherent to the current mode of production. In order to make such an argument, I have to return to Karl Marx and his fundamental critique of capitalism. While his later works, such as *Das Kapital* (1867), are mostly devoted to economic critique, works of the early Marx are able to explain the current situation. The most important work for this thesis is the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1932), where the theory of alienation as the core of capitalist mode of production is explained by Marx. The cause of alienation – the estranged character of labor – has several far-reaching effects. It leads to the atomization of society and the loss of control over the world which humans collectively build – and to the consequent ideological hegemony of this state of affairs over them. Moreover, it alienates people from the shared fruit of their collective labor – from the future, warping their perception of time and temporality. As the result, people become unwilling to act against the catastrophes which they collectively cause.

While analyzing people's relations with catastrophes, I focus on one of these possible catastrophic futures – climate change and environmental collapse – in the present thesis for several reasons. First of all, it is the most certain of them – wars and future pandemics are still just a possibility, while the climate change is calculated and predicted: the point of no return will surely be passed by some certain date if nothing radically changes – in the current scenario there is no “if”, just “when”. Secondly, it represents the existential threat which deserves to be called apocalyptic even in comparison with a nuclear war, if the worst-case scenario becomes reality. Therefore, it is the most urgent of such threats and demands people's actions more than anything else. Thirdly, it is now agreed that the climate change is completely man-made (Powell 2019), and, therefore, humanity theoretically could have complete control over it. It is the fruit of collective human labor, and thus demonstrates how Marx's theory may work in such case. Moreover, it is widely recognized as the extreme threat, so those who don't believe in it cannot be a cause of global inactivity<sup>1</sup>. Finally, scientists themselves admit that radical transformation of society is necessary in order to avoid the worst. But the present action is still limited.

Indeed, more and more action is being taken in the sphere of politics. For example, there are certain international agreements which strive to limit carbon emissions mostly by taxation and soft regulations, and some countries have already declared climate emergency. Official contemporary plans are aimed at achieving carbon-neutral lifestyle by 2050-2060 while new, more radical agreements are being signed – on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 40 countries have

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<sup>1</sup>According to the UNDP data, 64% of people worldwide recognize the climate change as the emergency (UNDP 2021, 7).

pledged to cut their emissions by half by 2030. However, even if such trend looks inspiring and may encourage hope, such measures are still insufficient. There are several problems with such a response.

First of all, according to climate studies, in order to keep global warming within non-apocalyptic limits humanity has to become carbon-neutral or even carbon-negative in the nearest future: “the intervention time left to prevent tipping could already have shrunk towards zero, whereas the reaction time to achieve net zero emissions is 30 years at best” (Lenton 2019). And not only carbon emissions are the problem – industrial farming, deforestation and over-extraction of resources, plastic and chemical pollution and ecocides, while also being addressed, are overshadowed by carbon cutting. While the turn towards green energy gradually happens, those agreements do not propose, for example, abolishing animal industry. Moreover, irreversible damage to the environment takes place not only in the future – for example, at least 60% of wildlife is gone since 1970 and hundreds of species become extinct every year (WWF 2018, 7). Any delay increases damage which cannot be undone.

Secondly, these plans continuously fail to be accomplished and to keep climate change within limits: “If current national pledges to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions are implemented — and that’s a big ‘if’ — they are likely to result in at least 3 °C of global warming. This is despite the goal of the 2015 Paris agreement to limit warming to well below 2 °C.”, while “tipping points could be exceeded even between 1 and 2 °C of warming” (Lenton 2019), which means that abrupt catastrophic climate change is a real threat until the human impact to the environment is not just limited, but partially *undone*. However, new agreements are aimed not at lowering this level, but at not exceeding it – and they may fail again.

Thirdly, these plans are limited by restrictions to the current mode of production and are aimed at trying to reduce the threat while damaging capitalist economy as little as possible, which is harmful if capitalism is what causes the catastrophic threat. In order to effectively avoid the worst outcome, much more significant transformation is required: “Incremental linear changes to the present socioeconomic system are not enough to stabilize the Earth System. Widespread, rapid, and fundamental transformations will likely be required to reduce the risk of crossing the threshold” (Steffen 2018).

Finally, these actions are taken solely by governments and by those in power, while the existential level of the threat presupposes a collective response from all those affected –

from all human beings as such. Although worldwide social movements exist and are growing, those who act are few in comparison with those who recognize the threat. Moreover, those “grassroots” responses to climate change are mostly limited by individual actions – for example, one is expected to go vegan or to reduce one’s carbon footprint – and, even if collective actions occur, those groups are not big enough and are usually aimed not at changing the whole society’s way of living, but at some smaller goals which are not enough to stop the catastrophe.

Hence, even though the apocalyptic threat is widely recognized, its recognition does not lead to sufficient global collective action: the common response to the apocalypse is anxious inactivity which may take form either of acceptance, resignation and fatalism or of estranged hope that things may fix themselves without people’s interference. In both cases, people avoid attempting to change the world and the way they live: even if capitalist way of living is seen as causing or amplifying current and future catastrophes, it is still “easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism” (Jameson 2003, 76).

In the present thesis, I argue that alienation can explain this insufficient response. The thesis is divided into three main chapters, each of which is divided into two subchapters, in which different effects and forms of alienation are described based on Marx’s ideas, while other authors are employed to demonstrate how these effects work and how they affect human society, activity and worldview. The fourth chapter stands outside of the main argument and is devoted to proposing possible solutions to the described situation.

The first chapter, “Alienation from one another”, is devoted to the basic level of alienation – from other human beings and from society, which is thus atomized, complicating collective activity. In the first subchapter, “Estranged labor”, I unpack Marx’s own concept of alienation in order to base my later arguments on it. According to Marx, the estranged character of labor makes workers lose control not only over the fruits of their labor, but also over their lives. The mediation of productive relations by the capitalist system masks the collective character of productive activity. Most importantly, as humans collectively produce the world around them, by being alienated from production they are also alienated from the world, from the process of its “creation” and from other participants of it – from the humanity. It makes them not recognize both their collective potential and power to change the world and their interdependence on each other. The second subchapter, “Undoing the Demos”, describes the undermining of another dimension of this world-

creating activity, which was mostly ignored by Marx – politics. In order to make connection between Marx and the present day, this subchapter is based on the contemporary work of Wendy Brown, who argues that neoliberalism has deprived politics of power to challenge the economic system – the mode of production – by economizing every sphere of human activity. If previously people were able to partially use their collective world-creative power through political institutions, now politics can only operate within the “objective” economic frameworks – and people, thus, were nearly completely alienated from their collective ability to shape the world, which was given to the laws of economics.

In the second chapter, “Alienation from the world”, I demonstrate how alienation from individual activity and from the collective creation of the world makes people perceive the world as self-standing and immovable. The first subchapter, “Distanced nature”, shows how human relations with nature are mediated by capitalism, masking humans’ dependence on nature and making people not recognize what harm and risk does their activity impose on it. Moreover, it makes one not recognize if he can reduce such destruction, making nature seem independent from individual actions. The second subchapter, “There is no alternative”, shows how, by being alienated from the creation of the human world, one later encounters it and perceives it as given, seeing the society as being independent from human actions. This part is strongly based on Marxist theory from the 20<sup>th</sup> century – on Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse – as well as on other theorists, such as Max Weber and Mark Fisher. Capitalism, which is created by human activity, is seen either as determined by objective laws of economics or as a part of human nature – in both cases, as the inevitable part of reality. It is thus perceived as impossible to change and alternatives to it are seen as utopian. If there is no alternative to the system which causes catastrophes, then there is no alternative to the apocalypse.

The third chapter, “Alienation from the future”, is devoted to the problems of modern temporality which are caused by alienation. In the first subchapter, “The time is out of joint”, I demonstrate that both the contemporary inability to consciously create the future, described by Francois Hartog as “presentism,” and the idea of “unprecedented change”, conceptualized by Zoltan Simon, can also be explained by applying Marxist theory to modern historicity. The immovability of the capitalist system makes people stuck in the endless present and unable to imagine a future which is different from it, which prevents them from being able to build anything beyond the present. When humans encounter climate change, it is perceived as something alien to them, as coming from



outside of history, and as disconnected from both the present and the past. People then see this future as impossible to influence or prevent – and as too big to deal with as they are alienated from their collective power – which leads to acceptance and fatalism. In the second subchapter, “Apocalypse not now”, I argue that the mixture of presentism with certain (apocalyptic) futures leads to the chimerical regime of historicity, creating the gap between the bubble of the “now” and the future. The future then has a dual character – it is seen as inevitable, but continuously postponed, it is thought to certainly come, but “later, not now”. People seem to always have plenty of time to act, which makes those who are not in despair inactive and hope that things will be somehow fixed in time even if the apocalypse is at the gates. If the future is both eternally postponed and independent from individual actions, people cannot base their actions on it and are limited by recreating the present again and again until the very catastrophe.

In the fourth chapter, “What can be done”, I analyze two schools of philosophy which may encourage people to act against the catastrophe despite their alienation. In the first subchapter, “Stoicism in troubling times”, I demonstrate that ancient Stoicism can encourage individual activity as it considers good actions as such to be valuable, no matter what the result is. However, this attitude does not overcome alienation from others or from the world, limiting oneself by acting alone within the status-quo. Hence, it is only partially effective. In the second subchapter, “Rage, rage against the dying of the light”, I show that the apocalypse may be perceived similarly with death, but on a global scale. Thus, I suggest that the existential philosophy of Albert Camus can be applied to the current situation. Both death and the apocalypse make life meaningless, but there is a way to overcome it – existential revolt against this injustice. This revolt means acting even if one’s struggle is absurd and fruitless. One shall find new meanings and values in the world, which can reconnect people to act together, overcoming alienation and making it possible to change the world. However, this approach can be suggested only to those who gave up any hope, while potentially being fruitful in this case.

In the conclusion, I summarize how this conflux of effects, caused simply by the estranged character of labor, prevents people from acting globally and collectively against the catastrophes which they themselves produce, making them see these catastrophes as independent from their activity and inevitable, and how this inactivity may possibly be overcome.

## Defining alienation

In the very beginning it is necessary to clarify the definition of “alienation“, as this term plays the most significant role in the present thesis. This notion has different meanings and is used in different theories, so I will distinguish the one which is used in my thesis from the others in order to avoid terminological confusion. First of all, it has to be stated that the words “alienation” and “estrangement” are used interchangeably in the translations of analyzed works, while the original German words “Entfremdung” and “Entäusserung” may differ in meaning: “Entäusserung” may be translated as “externalization”, while “Entfremdung” is literally “estrangement”.

Marx’s own theory originated from the previous philosophical tradition. As a philosophical notion, “alienation“ (Entäusserung) was firstly used by J.G. Fichte in *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation* (1792) “, where he stated that “the idea of God <...> is thus based on an alienation of what is ours, on translating something subjective into a being outside us” (Fichte 2010, 41).

Later, “Alienation” as “Entfremdung” was used by G.W.F. Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), mostly as a part of the dialectical process. In this case, as Jaanika Puusalu argued (2018), alienation was for him a positive experience: it occurred when one entity encountered something other from itself and recognized the difference between itself and it, becoming conscious of itself: “each by its alienation from the other gives it an existence and equally receives from it an existence of its own” (Hegel 1977, 299). However, Hegel also used the word “alienation” referring to religious alienation, like Fichte, and to social alienation (which was for him negative).

Another important interpretation of “Entäusserung”, which Marx in his work has referred to, was given by Ludwig Feuerbach in *The Essence of Christianity* (1841). This interpretation is close to Fichte’s understanding of religious alienation: “religion alienates our own nature from us, and represents it as not ours” (Feuerbach 2008, 193).

Marx has referred to both Hegel’s dialectical theory and Feuerbach’s materialism, but his understanding of “alienation” was different from their ideas. For Marx, alienation was neither religious externalization, nor essential contradistinction, but primarily the disjunctions of one’s relations with something (or someone). In *Economic and Philosophic manuscripts of 1844* (1932), he describes alienation as occurring when the fruit of one’s labor does not belong to him; as the result, one becomes alienated from one’s life and other workers, but

these stages of the alienation are only the consequences of the “economic fact” which is the essence of alienation (Marx 1978, 71). While he used both German notions interchangeably, in relation to this fact he mostly used the word “Entfremdung”.<sup>2</sup>

However, it has to be mentioned that distinct interpretations of alienation exist among contemporary Marxists. Such interpretations may abandon both Marxist-economic and Hegelian-dialectic roots of this notion. For example, Rahel Jaeggi, a contemporary Frankfurt School scholar, recently attempted to redefine alienation. Her definition of it as the opposite of “having oneself at one’s command” (Jaeggi 2016 p.34) is, therefore, closer to an existentialist understanding. In this case, “the problem of alienation is tied to that of freedom” (Ibid) instead of being economic or ontological notion. Moreover, such definition is rather imprecise, making alienation more of a feeling than of a technical philosophical term.

While this notion was also used both by sociologists, psychoanalysts and existential philosophers, in the present thesis, I use the word “alienation” referring primarily to the understanding which Karl Marx has given to it and to its consequences. Therefore, although my interpretation of alienation does not differ from the commonly established understanding in the Marxist philosophy, the difference of my approach is the application of the established notion of alienation not only to material relations of humans and objects, but also to people’s relations with temporality, historicity and the future.

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<sup>2</sup> Without specialized analysis, it seems that the notion of alienation has remained rather stable in later Marxist philosophy, even though many of those philosophers – for example, members of the Frankfurt school of first generation – barely mentioned alienation. This concept still had a significant influence on their texts but was seemingly taken as an obvious fact which does not need mentioning (Puusalu 2018, 64-65).

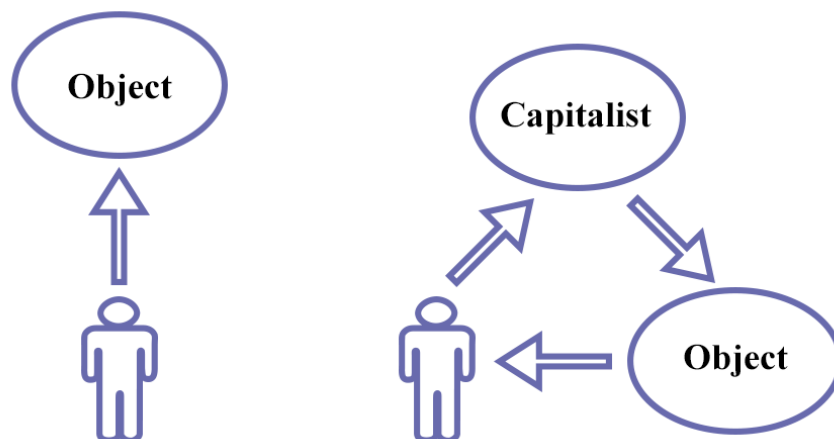
## Chapter 1

### Alienation from one another

#### 1.1. Estranged labor

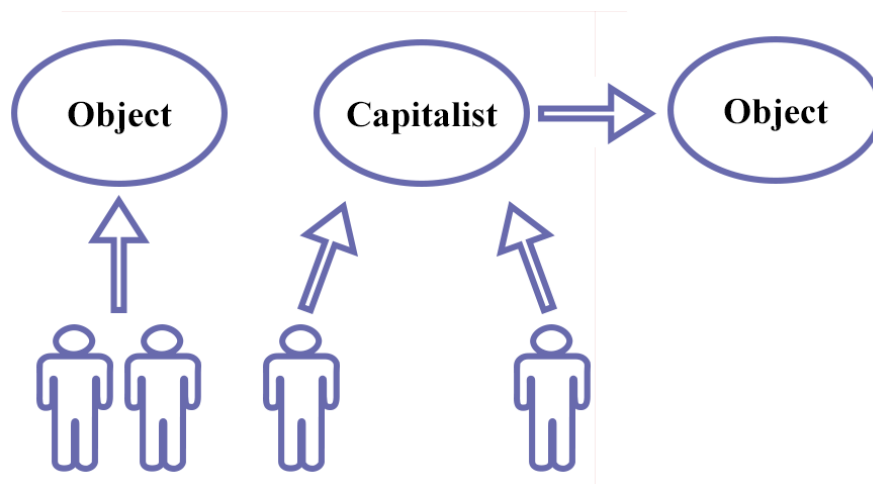
In the present chapter I will describe the very basic cause of society's mostly inactive response to the threatening futures: the disjunction of social commonality, the alienation of the individual from other humans and from humankind as such, which makes the recognition of common power and of common goals, of a common role in the creation of shared living conditions, and, consequently, the organization of common action more complicated or sometimes impossible. In order to describe this phenomenon, to show how it is bound to the dominant economic system and to provide the overall common ground for the consequent chapters, in this subchapter, I will outline Marx's concept of alienation, which is the central axis of my thesis. I will demonstrate how alienation occurs from the economic conditions and how it prevents human unity; further consequences of alienation are to be described in later chapters.

The general definition of alienation, which was given by Marx himself in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, is such: when the alienation in the sphere of capitalist production is considered, the object which is produced by the laborer is being taken from him, which makes the worker to be "related to the product of his labor as to an alien object" (Marx 1978, 72), he "confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer" (ibid, 71), as something which has nothing to do with him. Developing this idea furthermore, one can say that something which is strongly related to the individual or to a group of them – or which is a part of them – is being separated from them, and is therefore seen as external and self-standing, even though the connection still exists while being distorted and altered.



It was stated by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* that the economic system is the basis of society, which determines all aspects of human life (Marx 1978, 150) and influences human behavior, ethics and morality (Engels 1978, 726). Therefore, the cause of alienation, for Marx, lies in the economic system, but the scheme is not so simple because alienation has different levels which are linked to one another.

For Marx, labor, or production, is an important part of human beings. Creative and free labor distinguishes humans from animals and is part of human nature: “for in the first place labor, life-activity, productive life itself, appears to man merely as a means of satisfying a need <...> yet the productive life is the life of the species” (Marx 1978, 75-76). In the interdependent society, labor is a collective process, and relations in which humans engage in order to perform such labor – for Marx, all social relations (Ibid, 4) – are called in this case the “productive relations”. The form of labor and its division determine the current mode of production (Ibid, 150,154). According to *Das Kapital*, through labor one produces what he can use or exchange – consequently, use value and exchange value (Marx 1978, 303-304). These values basically (in the classless society) belong to the ones who produce them; the productive relations are thus uncorrupted and flat, and, also, direct – social unity is constituted by these unmediated relations of collaboration, distribution and communication.



In the capitalist economics this basic condition is replaced by wage labor, when the product does not fully belong to ones who produce – it is taken from him by the capitalist and a part of its value is given back in a form of wage (Ibid, 350). Moreover, the worker produces not the product itself, but the commodity form or the value, not recognizing the object of his labor as such. This causes several effects which damage the productive relations and the essence of workers. The product is the objectification of labor which was

put into its production and of time spent on it (Ibid, 71). Hence, by being alienated from the product of his labor, one also becomes alienated from the labor process (Ibid, 71-72) and from his life during this time. Furthermore, this labor is not free, as economic coercion – threat of poverty – is the basis of labor market: “labor is the worker's own life-activity, the manifestation of his own life. And this life-activity he sells to another person in order to secure the necessary means of subsistence. Thus, his life-activity is for him only a means to enable him to exist” (Ibid, 204). Labor is also not so creative in this case, as one’s activity is not decided by oneself but is instead monitored and regulated by the capitalist.

Even if Marx’s labor-centric view can be debatable, it still can be stated that work constitutes the most significant part of an individual’s life: it consumes the most part of one’s time, determines one’s position in the society and his self identity. Leisure becomes nothing more than the means for keeping one suitable for work: to have rest and to recharge for another workday (Ibid, 373). One’s free activities and interests are also displaced to the periphery of one’s life. Hence, it is possible to say that one is alienated from himself. This leads to discontent in one’s life which is no longer fully his (Ibid, 78).

According to Marx’s vision of human nature, the life process is being damaged in such way that the worker only possesses the animal part of his essence – he can freely eat, sleep, breed, but the labor, which separates human from animal, is now forced and compulsive (Ibid, 74). Moreover, as it alienates him from his species nature – labor – it alienates him from other members of his species (Ibid, 75-76). With even his body alienated from him (Ibid, 77), the worker becomes a mere cog in a factory machine (Ibid, 389). Even if claims about human nature may seem old-fashioned, one does not undermine Marx’s theory by dismissing them. Even if labor does not belong to human nature, it is being made the main goal of human life by this economic system instead of being only the mean to sustain this life and to enable more important activities (Ibid, 74) – and it is alienated by being controlled by the others and by being used for their profit.

As the worker now produces “quantity instead of quality” (Ibid, 320) – exchange value instead of the use value – he becomes only a number, one of the many. He becomes a subject of capitalism (Engels 1978, 718), no longer an active person. Workers are being counted, quantified, forming “homogenous labor army” over the capitalist’s surveillance (Marx 1978, 479). For the system of quantitative production, one is just the average worker, producing average product in average labor-time (Ibid, 326).

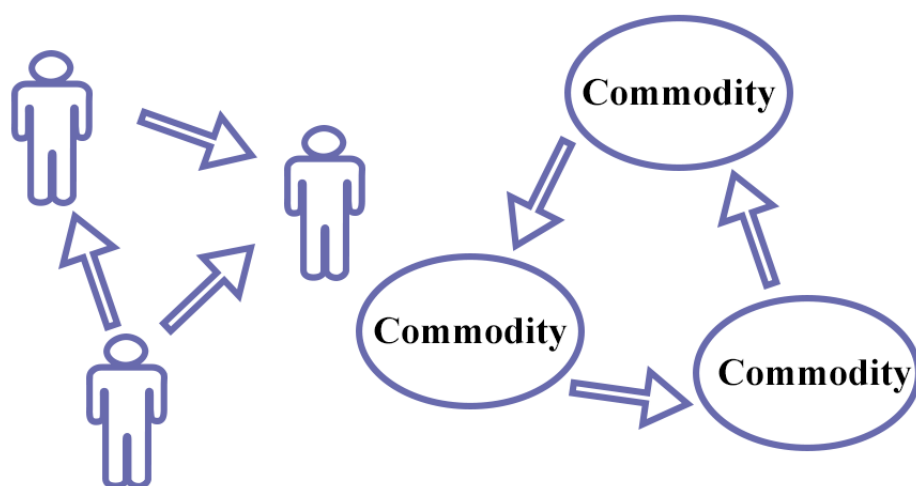
This brings the society into both the homogenization and atomization of the human character, leading to machine-like consumerist society as it was described by Herbert Marcuse in *One-Dimensional Man* (Marcuse 2007, 10). As Marcuse argues, this relates both to production and consumption (Ibid, 246) – people are deprived of their personalities outside of the working process, as they basically have no time for developing their individuality, which can thus be expressed only through one’s job or through one’s consumer choices, and the pre-formed consumer with pre-formed needs easily buys pre-produced quantitative products. This depersonalization is not only caused, but continuously amplified by the character of labor: “the worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him” (Marx 1978, 72). The more one engages with capitalism, the more devotes oneself to his work, the less one belongs to oneself – and, simultaneously, the more one internalizes this system (Marx 1978, 72-73, Debord 2002, 11). Hence, workers actively produce further alienation (Marx 1978, 73-74).

There is another factor which is to be mentioned if I speak of how working conditions produce and increase the alienation of the workers. It is another cornerstone of the capitalist system and of the labor market – namely, competition (Ibid, 483). Workers are inevitably forced to compete with one another, as the system as such is based on the artificial scarcity (Marcuse 1974, 37) – for example, on that of money. When one applies to a job or enrolls to the university, he competes with the others (Marx 1978, 71) who are in equal position with him; the chances to improve this position are limited. Some are winners, and some are losers.

Therefore, one shall not worry about the wellbeing of others, or he himself may lose. They do not exist for him as humans outside of this competition – so it does not bother him what consequences their loss may bring upon them; they basically “disappear” from the scene after the loss. This undermines empathy and promotes careless individualism, thus atomizing the society (Ibid, 481). This pattern of thinking, while being inhabited, makes humans treat those who suffer as losers – this system serves the dual purpose, it simultaneously brands the losers as the unlucky ones, the victims of their fate which is blind and merciless, and also revives the remnants of the protestant ethic which was described by Max Weber as a part of capitalist logic (Weber 2001, 111, xxxix): if one wins, it is not mere luck, but it shows one’s worthiness: one had an audacity to win, while the losers were unworthy and their loss is their fault, so one shall not care about them: “for the damned to complain of their lot would be much the same as for animals to bemoan the fact

they were not born as men <...> We know only that a part of humanity is saved, the rest damned” (Ibid, 60).

Therefore, productive relations are altered when workers are forced to perceive each other with indifference or hostility and are masked by the alienated character of individual labor. But this also affects the way in which people perceive the fruits of their labor – the commodities – and their movements. The commodity consists of both use and exchange values, but it also possesses something more complicated. As the productive – social – relations are objectified in it (Marx 1978, 320), the consumer starts to see within the commodity something that he has lost during production – his power, creativity, human essence, happiness (Ibid, 133). This is the key to the phenomena called “commodity fetishism” as it was described by Marx in *Das Kapital* (Ibid, 321). The productive relations between people are then seen as purely commodity relations between products of their labor (Marx 1978, 325; Debord 2002, 12). When the use values are locked within the products, people start to see each other as nothing but exchange values (Marx 1978, 328). For the capitalist, workers also become mere commodities (Ibid, 70-71). Hence, the workers are again alienated from each other, as relations between them are mediated by the commodity form and are not recognized as truly existing (Ibid, 77). Commodities are seen moving and reproducing by themselves, masking social relation hidden beneath this movement. Movements of commodities are then seen as either independent, and therefore as the objective part of the world, or as directed purely by some objective rules and laws of economics.



The process of alienation does not end here, as commodities are not being produced and consumed unmediated. The reflection of all the possible use values within the pure exchange value, the absolute objectification of worker’s labor-time is money (Ibid,

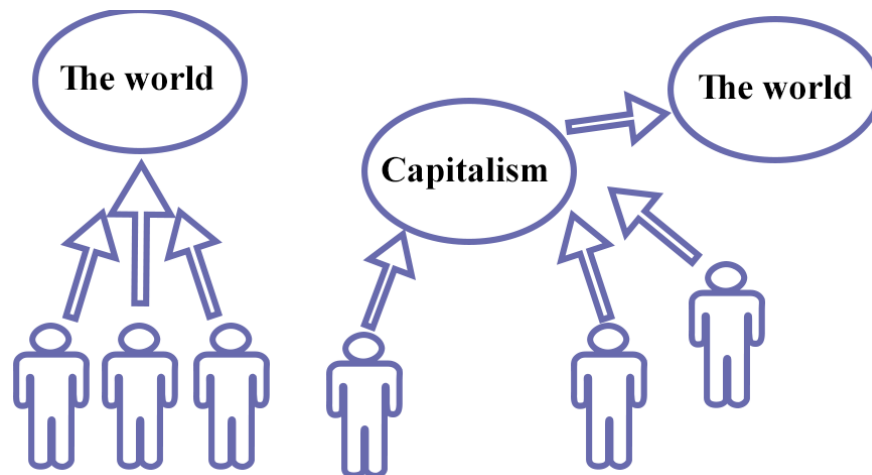


224,240,254). Money, in its turn, escalates the process of quantification, making labor, product and workers even more abstract and average (Ibid, 93). By mediating the individual and his needs, it also separates oneself from his life (Ibid, 102). Money now represents not only one's alienated powers and abilities, but also one's social role, place in society, human worthiness and qualities, so these qualities are alienated from their owners and are put into this abstract exchange equivalent.

But there is another aspect of alienation which may be the most important of the mentioned ones. The point is that the human world, which includes both civilization and nature, which is being appropriated by humans, is being constructed, reconstructed and shaped by collective human activity, through collective labor:

“It is just in the working-up of the objective world, therefore, that man first really proves himself to be a species being. This production is his active species life. Through and because of this production, nature appears as his work and his reality. The object of labor is, therefore, the objectification of man's species life: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he has created” (Ibid, 76).

Each human transforms the world a little bit by one's everyday activities – and this process is inherently collective, as humans share this world and each of them inevitably contributes to it.



But under capitalism this individual activity is alienated from the individual, just as his productive powers and his creativity. Hence, the individual still influences this world, but unconsciously or without the full ability to decide how to do it – he is told what to do, and for him this activity is not a self-worthy process, but just a mean to keep oneself from poverty. By not recognizing one's personal role in world-creation, one does not recognize

the role of other individuals too. Hence, the world is seen by humans as being self-standing and independent from humans – or they think this creative power belongs to the ruling class or to the political institutions. Thus, by not seeing the collectively-made character of the human world, people do not see the collectivity of humans which stands behind this process – and also do not recognize their collective potential power of shaping and changing this world in its totality.

Instead of acting together to change the world and avoid the catastrophe of climate change, people then tend either to blame some external powers and to accept their fate, or to demand the change from these powers – for example, by asking the ruling class to do something with it. In other cases, one can blame oneself – and blame the others too. But the others are seen in this case as atomized individuals with individual responsibilities. When one urges others to respond to the future threat, he expects from them not the collective action, but series of simultaneous, but still separate and individual actions, which are limited as they lack the world-creating potential of the collective. Thus, instead of reorganizing society, humans are supposed to better their individual behaviors, control their consumer choices, eat less meat, reduce their carbon footprint, wear a mask etc. Of course, all these actions are important, but they are not enough as they do not question the status-quo – instead, humans then continue to re-create the harmful status-quo in their unconsciously collective world-creative activity.

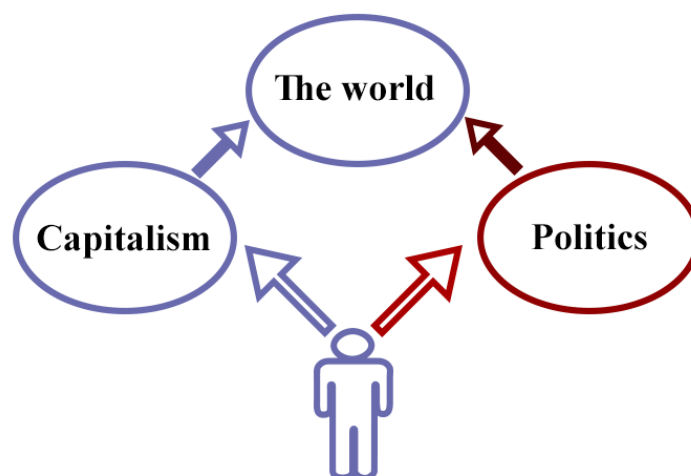
## **1.2. Undoing the Demos**

Marx has stated that the economic basis is the determinant of every aspect of social life. Political and other institutions are only the superstructure, mere reflections and products of this system (Marx 1978, 4,163). If one follows this idea, one can conclude that, if workers are exploited, they are completely alienated from the process of collective creation of the world and, therefore, do not have any power at all (Ibid, 76). However, the process of constructing the world could also be accessed via politics and political institutions. Such institutions simultaneously alienate part of people's world-creating power from them and provide the access to the mediated usage of this accumulated collective power. Hence, collective creation of the world in this case is divided into two separate kinds of activity – economic activity, such as one's production and consumption, and political activity. Workers, while being completely alienated from their economic power, still possessed the political one. In this subchapter I will show that this remaining political power is also being undermined by the modern form of capitalism – namely, by

neoliberalism. This subchapter stands outside of my general structure of argumentation, but it is necessary to, firstly, demonstrate that Marx’s economic reductionism is not inappropriate in the neoliberal system and that economic alienation may nowadays be extrapolated to all human activity, and, secondly, to partially answer the question of my thesis – why sufficient action against apocalyptic futures has not been possible in the sphere of politics?

As neoliberalism is much younger than Marxism, in order to see how things have changed I base my analysis on contemporary research. Wendy Brown, who is strongly rooted in Marxism and in 20<sup>th</sup> century Critical Theory, provides such a possibility with her work on the rise of neoliberalism, on its ideological characteristics and on the deconstruction of traditional political sphere by it.

According to Brown, the separation of human activity into distinct spheres was connected with the ideological perception of humans as such – to be precise, with two competing visions of humans. The first of them was the concept of *homo politicus*: the “political animal who, with his equals, rules and is ruled in turn” (Brown 2015, 88). Human masses were also seen as the *demos* – the population, “concerned with and asserting its political sovereignty” (Ibid, 65). Political activity was seen as a kind of praxis – as the activity which is valuable by itself (Ibid, 204). Liberal ideology, while promoting capitalism, has still incorporated and supported this vision of humans, seeing people’s involvement into the world-creating process through the political institutions as one of core principles of society.



While the governments were still serving the capital and were protecting it from the workers, these political institutions were also playing a role of the mediator between the

masses and the capital, and some kind of demands and negotiations were possible, even though actions within this system were mostly limited by the status quo of capitalism (Ibid, 207). In any case, political humans were able to shape the world around them and to “regulate their common life through ruling themselves together” (Brown 2015, 202) consciously, collectively and, in theory, independently from the economic system.

The second concept of the human is the one connected with economic activity – *homo oeconomicus*. In this vision, humans primarily (or solely) as economic agents, “tasked with improving and leveraging its competitive positioning and with enhancing its (monetary and nonmonetary) portfolio value across all of its endeavors and venues” (Ibid, 10). This concept was used and amplified by capitalism. Its form and status (to what degree it was supposed to define human beings) was determined by views on the economy as such: “what *homo oeconomicus* is depends upon how the economy is conceived and positioned vis à vis other spheres of life, other logics, other systems of meaning, other fields of activity” (Ibid, 81).

Concepts of *homo politicus* and *homo oeconomicus* coexisted with each other within the liberal worldview, but this balance was fragile as each of them aimed to become universal: “every image of man is defined against other possibilities – thus, the idea of man as fundamentally economic is drawn against the idea of him as fundamentally political, loving, religious, ethical, social, moral, tribal, or something else” (Ibid).

During the shift in capitalist ideology during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “economy” as a concept started to grow extensively, as “neoliberalism submits all spheres of life to economization”, becoming the only dimension of life instead of being one of the many (Ibid, 108). Social life was “economized” as human activities were seen as purely economical activities and the society, consequently, was supposed to be governed by economical laws instead of being ruled by sovereign *demos*, letting “market-instrumental rationality to become the dominant rationality organizing and constraining the life of the neoliberal subjects (Ibid).

This growth was caused by two main factors: the logic of capitalism, which is oriented on monetizing everything and turning it into profit (Ibid, 94,176), and the positivist character of the economic science, which pretends instead to discover some fundamental natural laws, trying to explain everything by economic means and potentially depicting all human relations as market or commodity relations in its “objective” discourse: “the market

is itself true and also represents the true form of all activity. Rational actors accept these truths, thus accept reality” (Ibid, 67).

As a consequence of such extension of the “economy”, the role of *homo oeconomicus* has also increased. The consequent vanquishing of *homo politicus* can be seen in the neoliberal views on the role of the state and of politics as such. These views are opposed to the idea of the welfare state, where the government was seen as responsible for social politics and the population’s wellbeing (Ibid, 130). Neoliberalism, instead, openly admits that the sole purpose of any organization, including the state, is to “comport themselves in ways that maximize their capital value in the present and enhance their future value” (Ibid, 22).

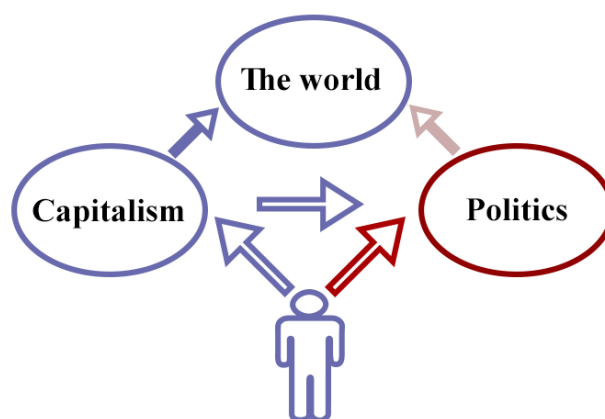
Examples of such reductionism can be seen in the neoliberal vision of some relations as purely relations between the buyer and the provider of some service – the effects of such oversimplification is mostly noticeable in such relations which were traditionally seen as being more deep and significant, as having an important social role: relations between the doctor and the patient, between the teacher and the student – and also between the governor and the governed. In these cases, the social character of people’s relations is masked by this vision. People’s behavior is supposed to be based not on social motives, but solely on market rationale: “market principles frame every sphere and activity, from mothering to mating, from learning to criminality, from planning one’s family to planning one’s death” (Ibid, 68).

Social differences in the character of labor in different spheres, which were connected with ideas of public service and of human society as the *demos*, are also negated, and the use value which is produced by workers is masked by the exchange value, so the social function of their labor has become even more neglected – they are seen as mostly similar in their function despite the differences in their jobs’ social implications (Ibid, 136-137). This shift is reflected by the trend to bring practices which were efficient in one type of labor into another sphere, as such logic “permits private-sector practices to move readily into the public sector; it allows, for example, educational or health care institutions to be transformed by practices developed in the airline or computer industries” (Ibid, 137), which results in the reorientation of the public sector towards the maximal profitability – and in the reduction of it if it is not financially profitable. One’s activity no longer serves the others or the public in general – one simply produces some abstract value. The world, therefore, is not supposed to be influenced or bettered through public services or social

functions. Therefore, the ability to recognize one's (and collective) contributions to the creation of the world is severely diminished when social character of labor is masked by neoliberal ideology.

Governments and states as such in this model are not supposed to serve the public too: "legitimacy and task of the state becomes bound exclusively to economic growth, global competitiveness, and maintenance of a strong credit rating" (Ibid, 40). States are "subordinated to the market, govern for the market, and gain or lose legitimacy according to the market's vicissitudes; states also are caught in the parting ways of capital's drive for accumulation and the imperative of national economic growth" (Ibid, 108). Thus, political institutions detach from ideas of common good or of public service. Instead of actively shaping the world, political institutions were therefore limited by guaranteeing the functioning of the status-quo.

Political decisions have become mostly dictated by the needs of the economy, so, instead of being ruled by the people, politics is now governed by the laws of the economics. The state of affairs is also seen as determined by these laws and cannot be challenged by people's usage of political institutions, which now have power to act only within the "objective" economic limitations. So, as politics as such has been mostly deprived of power to change the world – as this power was given solely to the economics (Ibid, 129). Therefore, in the neoliberal worldview the concept of *homo politicus* has been completely replaced by *homo oeconomicus*, who is not the creator, but a servant of the economy. Politics was reduced to economics and was subdued to it. People then were completely alienated from their collective creative power too.



Without the power to change the world through either economical or political activity, people no longer recognize the world as the fruit of their actions – and they are thus alienated from this fruit and from their collective life and labor. This alienation

prevents recognition of commonality with other people, solidarity and organization. The idea of “society” as such was dependant on the politically active *demos*, on some “whole”, which does not exist in neoliberal ideology: “the figuration of human beings as human capitals eliminates the basis of a democratic citizenry, namely a *demos* concerned with and asserting its political sovereignty” (Ibid, 65).

Without ideas of public service or of social labor and without common political activity, which could unite people, society as community ceases to exist, being replaced with atomized mass of people – just like Margaret Thatcher said, “there is no such thing as society. There are only individual men and women” (Ibid, 100). Moreover, as the vision of humans as political sovereigns was opposed to the economic determinism of *homo oeconomicus*, it was providing ground for challenging the status quo through collective political action. Even liberal democracy, even though it was always connected with capitalism (Ibid, 205), was able to be used to criticize capitalism and to reshape the society “as long as it is operated in a different lexical and semiotic register from capital” (Ibid, 208). *Homo oeconomicus*, concerned only with profit and concurrence, could not be a part of an active political body as he operates solely within the economic frameworks and is not interested in collective social activity. When this vision of human became dominant, the media of political communication and cooperation between people was severely undermined, increasing the alienation of individual from the others and from humanity as a whole and making cooperation much harder. If previously one could not influence the world through one’s economical activity as it was alienated from him, now political action seems to be just as useless as the general shape of the society is determined by economic laws, and politics has indeed become a mere superstructure to this system, being unable to structurally change the state of affairs. The world is then seen not as being ruled by its creators, but as something alien to them.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Alienation from the world**

#### **2.1. Distanced nature**

In the previous chapter it has been shown that the alienation of a worker from the fruit of his labor leads to the alienation between workers. This, in its turn, leads to the dissimulation of collectivity and of collective potentialities to consciously change the world together – and it is much less achievable if each individual acts alone, within the frameworks of the status-quo. However, this stage of alienation has its own consequences. In this subchapter I am going to show how alienation from nature is amplified by the capitalist mode of production. By mediating humans' relations with nature, capitalist mode of production increases both imaginary and physical distance between humans and nature and between it and the human world. Effects of one's activity on nature are alienated from oneself, which complicates the understanding of how one can minimize and reduce the harm.

According to Marx, humans – consciously or not – participate in the process of collective creation of the world (Marx 1978, 75-76). It means not only the human world (the society), but also the external world which surrounds this society. Nature, the environment is being actively appropriated by men in their collective activity, included into the human world – as “the worker can create nothing without nature, without the sensuous external world” – and is torn into the foundation, the material, the instrument (Ibid, 72). During the creation of the human world, nature is being shaped by humans – and not only locally (for example, by extracting certain minerals), but it is also being shaped universally in ontological sense, as it is transformed into an instrument – or into human “inorganic body”, as Marx puts it (Ibid, 75), highlighting humans' connection to nature and dependency on it – in its totality; humans may physically transform only a part of nature – even though “modern industrial societies in particular distinguish themselves by their unprecedented capacity to transform nature <...> on the planetary scale” (Broszmitter 2002, 4) –, but for it to be made they may first transform it inside their minds, seeing it as something to be shaped. Thus, if by being alienated from each other humans are also alienated from the collective creative activity, they are consequently alienated from the collective transformation of nature – and by being alienated from it they are thus alienated from the transformed nature as such.



Even though Marx highlighted that humanity is a part of nature, for him these ambitions of universality, of changing and shaping the world are a significant part of human essence and a characteristic of the human species (Marx 1978, 76). He still distinguished the human world from external nature and saw it from the position of domination – as a means of subsistence, of life and of production (Ibid, 75). His statement that by being linked to humanity “nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature” (Ibid) does not disprove this distinction: the dichotomy between mankind and nature is required to draw such a scheme. And actually, *this* is the first stage of alienation from nature – the ontological alienation into the separate category of being, the creation of imaginable “distance <...> from nature in order to arrange it in such a way that it can be mastered” (Adorno & Horkheimer 2002, 31).

This kind of alienation has far preceded capitalism and, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, has actually enabled both capitalism and the Enlightenment; it is the cornerstone of modernity. The logic of domination and the instrumental rationality of human relations with nature were traced by them to the pre-historic times (Ibid, xviii, 5). For them, people who live in the world full of myths, who do not forge their fate, depending instead totally on nature, are free from this logic (Ibid, 1), but the beginning of any manipulations (Ibid, 6), of attempts to change the world, to liberate humanity from nature (Ibid, 149), signifies that the balance has shifted from harmony to domination: since then “what human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings” (Ibid, 2).

Even though the development of an instrumental worldview has started long before, it is still connected with capitalism – it is embraced and amplified by it, as following this logic is required for survival and success in this system: “humans have a right, even an obligation, to use nature and its products for constant self-advancement. Capitalism is an intensely maximizing culture, always seeking to get more out of the natural resources of the world that it did the day before” (Broszmitter 2002, 58).

The ontological separation, the imaginary distance prevents humans from actually seeing their interdependence with nature, from seeing it as the subject with its own rights instead of being only a source of materials which can be easily sacrificed: “trees, wildlife, minerals, water, and the soil are all commodities to be bought and sold in the marketplace. <...> Functional interdependencies barely figure in the capitalist economic calculus” (Ibid).

The well-being of man depends on the well-being of nature, but it is seen as self-standing “alien world antagonistically opposed to him” (Marx 1978, 74).

Capitalism amplifies human alienation from nature in several ways. First of all, it increases the imaginary distance by enclosing the human world. One does not get his means of living directly from nature (Marx 1978, 72-73) – but receives a wage and buys food in the supermarket. He also does not get the means of his labor this way – they are instead provided to him by the employer. His relations with nature are, therefore, mediated by capitalism, but this mediation masks the true origin of his food and materials. If nature is seen in an instrumental way, the worker is alienated from this instrument – it is to be used by the others, not by him: “the more the worker by his labor appropriates the external world, sensuous nature, the more he deprives himself of means of life in the double respect: first, that the sensuous external more and more ceases to be an object belonging to his labor – to be his labour's means of life; and secondly, that it more and more ceases to be means of life in the immediate sense, means for the physical subsistence of the worker” (Ibid).

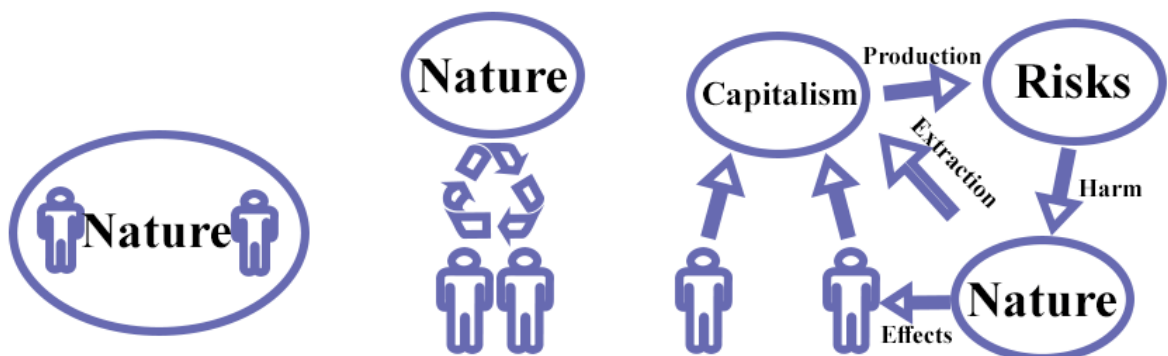
As humans are alienated from the collective world-creation, they do not participate in the transformation of nature consciously as they do not recognize their roles and powers in this process. The transformation of nature is the result of collective labor, but this result is unintended as there is no conscious plan, as each individual's power is separated from the collectivity and no collective decision was made – it “has been an unintended consequence of human choices” (Chakrabarty 2009, 210). Thus, humans' relations with nature are mediated and masked, so they do not see the power to change anything, being able only to demand something from those in power.

The distance between men and nature is often not only imaginable, but also physical. Not only human relations with it are disjointed, but individuals are often literally far from it. Urbanization encloses individuals in human-built environments: “only a small percentage of humankind has any direct, daily, active engagement with other species of animals and plants in their habitats” (Brosz 2002, 8), and, as the result, “few people are in the position to validate from personal experience that mass extinction of species and progressive ecocide ultimately run counter to their own long-term interests” (Ibid). Urban dwellers may only see some bits of nature during commuting or during the weekends, and these bits of nature are often significantly reshaped by humans (Marcuse 2007, 69). These reshaped bits of nature mask the distance which separates them from the living nature and the degree of their alienation from it (Ibid, 231).

The distant living nature is also mediated by the television screen, which makes it seem to take place in another dimension like if it is a movie. Catastrophes which are translated through the media are being integrated into the spectacle of everyday life as if they are something usual instead of being signs of the coming apocalypse, so that people are getting used to these occasions, not to mention that they are often presented in the hardly-perceivable numerical way, as if they happen in the dimension of numbers: “the earth’s ozone layer is menaced by industrial growth; nuclear radiation accumulates irreversibly. It merely concludes that none of these things matter. It will only talk about dates and measures <...> with a range of figures which are hard to convert” (Debord 1998, 13).

The non-recognition of actual harm is one of the main topics for sociologist Ulrich Beck, who also was strongly influenced by Marxian philosophy. Beck has described contemporary social order as the “risk society”. According to this conception, the whole society is built on dealing with harmful effects of its own activity (and with the risks of potential harm) and, simultaneously, on denying its guilt in making such harm to itself and to the environment (Beck 1992, 19) – which corresponds with the fact that consequences of individual actions (which are, sadly, fruits of their labor too) are alienated from individuals and are not seen by them, being later encountered as something completely alien to them.

Harm which is done to nature is often non-direct, it does not follow from certain action immediately, it may often take place in another country decades later and be a result of multiple unconnected actions, so the harm is often hard to calculate (Ibid, 22). Moreover, such harm is often invisible until it is too late – radioactive pollution and microplastic cannot be smelled, tasted or seen (Ibid, 23, 27), so the situation may seem to be not as bad as it is even if one is not distanced from the endangered area. Until the destructive effects enter the scene, their causes are reflected only in calculated probabilities of disaster – they are “both real and unreal” (Ibid, 33) they exist not as current affairs, but “in the projected dangers of the future” (Ibid, 34).



Because of the complicated character of these risks – and because of the division of labor, which separates workers from the full understanding of their labor process – the knowledge of these risks belong to those in power and those with expertise; the ability to accept or reject these risks hence also belongs to them (for example, workers do not know how their labor pollutes nature, and the consumers thus do not know what products are harmful in production). In the dialogue between economics and ecology the choice for those in power inclines to the consensus when both the possible damage and the costs to reduce it are considered acceptable – it could be reduced more, but it would be too expensive and not worth it (Ibid, 29). Thus, damage to be done is seen as necessary and unavoidable according to the logic of the market – the price of eco-friendly products would be too high to keep the producers competitive on the large scale. This choice is also dictated by the instrumental logic, which makes people evaluate everything from the position of dominant beings, the humanity, instead of evaluating it from the position of a species, a part of nature (Marcuse 1972, 60,62). Nature is still being seen as the instrument and what is discussed is the most effective way to use the instrument while keeping it intact.

These risks, as they still take place in the realm of calculations, are often represented as some percentages or averages instead of reflecting the real harm which is to be made, which make these risks to look more acceptable: “a person who inquires about the average already excludes many socially unequal risk positions <...> for which the levels of lead and the like that are 'on average harmless' constitute a mortal danger” (Beck 1992, 25). For example, the statement “the average temperature is supposed to rise by 1.5C” makes climate change not seem dangerous – but in reality, it means unbearable conditions in the most endangered regions which would force millions of people to immigrate or to suffer both with the intensification of natural disasters.

Ulrich Beck argues that, in this case, “social production of wealth is systematically accompanied by the social production of risks” (Ibid, 19) and is seen as inseparable from it (Ibid, 80) – the production of goods requires some sacrifices, civilization is impossible without risks (Ibid, 41) and if one wants to reduce the harm to the environment he should possibly consider rejecting all technological goods and returning to primitive state of affairs. Thus, the harm to the environment which is being made by capitalism is either not seen by the worker or is seen as being much less than it in reality is and as, therefore, the acceptable price for the existence of modern civilization. So, even if people see that capitalism and its endless growth cause the destruction of nature (Ibid, 23), they underestimate the degree to which damage is being done and are not so urgent to act.

However, those who understand the scale of destruction and are ready to act are faced with the condition which was mentioned before – by the separation from the collective world-creation and from the individual demiurgic power as such. It seems that nature is being shaped and damaged by someone else, by the faceless system: “one acts physically, without acting morally or politically. The generalized other - the system - acts within and through oneself” (Ibid, 33), but not by the individuals who continuously recreate the system and participate in it, so it is not in the hands of the people to stop this harm.

But if the harm which is being done by one’s activity is not easily recognizable, it is just as hard to recognize the benefits which come from the control over it: just as destruction, benefits are also reduced to percentages and averages. This reduction makes benefits to look insignificant, especially when those hardly calculable effects are considered – if refusing to eat meat can save some animals, what can individual reduction of the carbon footprint do? It is impossible to calculate the precise effect of such action, but the comforts which one has to sacrifice in order to achieve such reduction are much more palpable. If one, wanting to minimize the harm to nature, refuses to produce and consume completely (and manages to stay alive somehow), he reduces the common carbon emissions of humanity by a negligible fraction of percent. Benefits from calculable actions also become less recognizable when harm and action are separated by physical distance – when the harm, against which one acts, is being made in another country and one strives to save plants or animals which he’d never see. It is hard to act when the required activity seems meaningless but may cost for one his whole way of living.

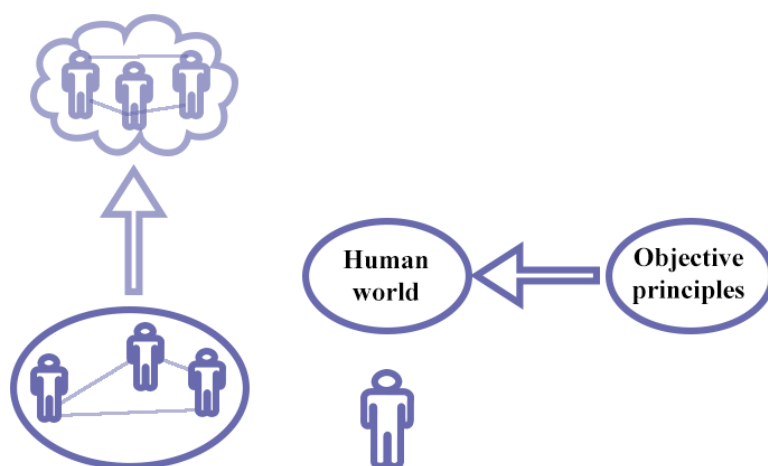
## **2.2. There is no alternative**

Alienation from collective activity alienates the worker from everything which is being collectively shaped and created. If its effects are present in human relations with nature which seems then to be impossible to consciously shape, the consequences for individuals’ perception of the human world are more severe. Nature exists besides human interference with it; it is only shaped and appropriated by humans, even though it can be perceived in the demiurgic vision that man “reproduces the whole of nature” (Marx 1978, 76). However, nature has become alienated from humans by the dichotomy between man and nature and the consequent re-inclusion of nature into the human world in the subdued form long before capitalism was created. It was perceived as another world, different from human society. The human world, in its turn, does not exist as some separate entity and it could not exist without humans; it did not precede humans, being totally created by human

activity – consciously or not. However, it is not perceived that way. In this subchapter, I will demonstrate how alienation from one another also alienates individuals from the human world, which makes them see no way to change it and, thus, to see no alternative to it. While Marx himself has seen such alternative in communism, the occurrence of communism was delegated by him to the principle of historical determinism, so humans' potentialities were still alienated from them into this "law of history". However, for other thinkers – such as Weber, Marcuse and Fisher – capitalism was characterized by this exact sense of non-alternativeness – whether it is called the "iron cage", the "one-dimensional society" or the "capitalist realism" – and by people's resignation from changing it.

By being alienated from human collective activity, humans are alienated from the product of this activity – as each individual activity contributes to the human world as it is being continuously created and recreated, so the human world is the product of activity (and of inactivity) of every human combined (Ibid p.76). As individuals are also alienated from their individual activities by the estranged character of their labor (Ibid, 71-72) – which makes someone else control how one contributes to the world-creation process – they also do not recognize their role in this world-creation and cannot direct and control it. They therefore encounter the world as "an alien reality" (Ibid, 87), as something in the creation of which they supposedly did not participate – and as they see the others in the same way, as automatons directed by someone's will, as functions, they therefore also do not recognize this demiurgic potentiality in other humans: "within the relationship of estranged labor each man views the other in accordance with the standard and the position in which he finds himself as a worker" (Ibid, 77). To whom does it belong then? It seems that to no one.

The situation becomes much more complicated when humans also do not recognize the creative potential of their ancestors. Humans are born into this world and they perceive it as it already is, in the given form. They, therefore, see this world as something which as such has a concrete form – they do not recognize that the world was created from zero by those who preceded them and that its form is the result of their choices (whether consciously or not) instead of being dictated by some laws of historical development – of course, humans do not change the world as they please, but the restrictions of their creative activity also come not from some external force, but from "circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past", from "the tradition of all the dead generations" (Ibid, 595), i.e. the discourse in which people exist is human-made: "men are the producers of their conceptions" (Ibid, 154).



Encountering the human world individuals also do not recognize that it exists because they “daily remake their own life” (Ibid, 156), and that they can decide in what form to remake it. Hence, if both past and present creative potentialities and their role in the formation of the world as humans see it are not recognized, the human world seems to be self-standing. Its form is seen as independent from human choices – as “it is how it *is*”. As human-human relations are disjointed or mediated by capitalism and humans are alienated from each other, human relations, from which the mode of production consists, are masked and seen as individual’s relations with the system as such or as relations between the commodities (Ibid, 320). Just as for Marx, society consists of productive relations and productive powers (Ibid, 4); the mode of production – in this case, capitalism – is nothing but the way in which these relations are conducted: a relation between the individuals, <...> their specific active relation to inorganic nature, a specific mode of working” (Ibid, 261). But this way of relating causes individuals to perceive the mode of production as the concrete system. Therefore, humans perceive the human world (the society) as existing *besides* human-human relations and besides individual productive activity, as if it exists by itself, as if it is a kind of entity. Society is thus seen as the dimension which is *opposed* to the individual just as nature was seen as opposed to the human world. Society ought to be seen as formed by human choices; instead, individuals see themselves as slaves of the current state of affairs.

This effect of alienation can be illustrated by Wendy Brown’s analysis of the development of understanding of the term “economics”. According to her, in its very beginning economics was seen as simply the methodology of production and of distribution of resources, targeted at “seeking a desired end with the least possible expenditure of means” (Brown 2015, 81-82). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it started to be understood as a separate

dimension of reality (Ibid, 81) where some special processes took place and which seemed to be self-standing and self-sustaining.

This vision is reflected in the positivist character of economics – economists refused to see it as pure methodology and pretend instead to discover some fundamental laws of nature, trying to explain everything by economic means and potentially depicting all human relations as market or commodity relations in this “objective” discourse (Ibid p.67). As Karl Marx has stated, in reality, economists do not study such laws, but human relations, and the laws which are found are both the result and the process of alienation of humans from their economic activity (Marx 1978, 534-535). Economic relations are relations between humans – direct or mediated – but these relations and economic agency are alienated from humans as individuals and from the humanity as a whole and then seen as independent and objective principles of the world.

Society started to be seen as being governed by these principles instead of being seen as formed and ruled by its participants: “the social position of the individual and his relation to others appear not only to be determined by objective qualities and laws, but these qualities and laws <...> appear as calculable manifestations of (scientific) rationality” (Marcuse 2007, 172). Humans create society every day, but they see it as an independent and self-sustaining entity which, in its turn, governs and directs their activity.

The vision of the society as obedient to some general laws which are natural and independent from individual choices has therefore formed the perception that the current state of affairs, if it is based on these laws, is the only possible one – or the only one which can properly function. Any other system is then seen as something which ignores these objective laws of nature or which is built to function against them and is therefore doomed to collapse or to spend the unreasonable amount of efforts to keep functioning. Society can be compared to a house, and the laws of economics with the law of gravity. If one wants to build a house, one should accept the existence of gravity – if one denies it, his house will fall apart. If he wants to challenge the law of gravity, the house will require the excessive amount of resources to be built, which is not worth it.

This kind of non-alternativeness applies not only to the sense of “external” laws, but also to the restriction of humans’ internal logic, which is what rules their productive relations and everyday activity and makes them reproduce this mode of production. The specific kind of rationality, which was mentioned before, is seen as the reason for the



enclosure of capitalist discourse not only by Marxists, but, for example, also by Max Weber (Weber 2001, xxxvii).

This specific kind of rationality, whether it is called “instrumental”, “scientific” or “technological”, is characterized by several features. First of all, rationality makes growth – the development of productive forces – its main value, which is not really supposed to serve any other ends and thus becomes the end for itself. For example, for Weber, it was reflected in the capitalist pursue for the endless multiplication of wealth (Ibid, 18), for Adorno and Horkheimer – in the endless race for “liberation” from nature and for the consequent conquest of it (Adorno & Horkheimer 2002, 149), for Marcuse – in the development of the technological apparatus for its own sake (Marcuse 2007, 149-150).

Second, this type of rationality justifies its claim to be the only right one in a circular way by appealing to the values which it proclaims to be such: by further economic development, by its technological achievements and by the abundance of commodities which are created simultaneously with the artificial false needs which these commodities are to satisfy (Ibid, 7,246). By such justification it undermines other visions of “rationality”, therefore proving itself to be the only true rationality, detaching from its subjective man-made character and becoming seen as objective natural principle (Ibid, 150), so humans alienate the principle of “rationality” from themselves (Adorno & Horkheimer 2002, 29).

Instead of being a tool, rationality becomes a goal, making humans strive for the rationalization of every sphere of life (Weber 2001, xxxviii-xxxix) in accordance with this specific rationality. As this rationality is the seen as the objectively right way to behave, it can be then imposed upon those who do not share in its principles (Adorno, Horkheimer 2004, 64). Humans are supposed to obey and serve this rationality for its own sake; economic and technological apparatus thus stops being a tool for humanity who then becomes servants for their own machines and possessions (Weber 2001, 111, 114), destined to perpetuate their growth (Marcuse 2007, 162). But as this rationality is seen as the only natural way of organizing the society, the possibilities for alternative way of living are undermined.

If the system is not based on this rationality, it is not supposed to work at all. The alternative can be seen as being better for humans and for the environment, but simply impossible – as the naïve unrealistic utopia (Marcuse 2007, 149). This has severely restricted human imagination which is required for any kind of creativity, as nothing believable besides the current version of society cannot be imagined anymore (Ibid, 75),

making individuals stuck both physically and mentally in this one dimension of reality (Ibid, 7). The world-creative collective activity is thus restricted by the horizon of the imaginable, which is, in its turn, limited by what already exists. Humans are thus able only to endlessly reproduce the present instead of creating the better future, being caught by the logic which they themselves created:

“This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. In Baxter’s view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the ‘saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment’. But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage” (Weber 2001, 123).

The core of this problem is not rationality as such, as this rationality is not the only one possible and other kinds of rationality were prevailing before (Weber 2001 p.33). The problem is that humans see this rationality as something objective which exists outside of them as one of the laws of nature instead of recognizing that it was created by their predecessors. The lack of collective creative power hence limits human imagination more than the principle of rationality – if they cannot imagine the possibility to change the world as they please, the alternative world thus also becomes unachievable and individuals cannot believe in any such world which they try to imagine. Recognition of collective creative powers in the present can let humans recognize them in their past, demonstrating that the iron cage of their discourse is man-made (Marx 1978, 154) and, thus, can be replaced by another one, which would not place means before the ends.

But the lack of such recognition has led to the phenomenon which Mark Fisher has named “capitalist realism”. Fisher describes this “realism” as the dominant, but latent ideology which is not being recognized. Instead, the view on reality dictated by this ideology is seen as true unmediated sight. Capitalism is therefore seen as reality as such, which for Fisher, demonstrates the “naturalization” and overwhelming effectiveness of capitalist ideology (Fisher 2009, 17). The association of capitalism with reality is continuously retranslated via culture and mass media because even in the sphere of art, the framework of this “realism” is impenetrable (Ibid, 9). It has to be noticed that one still can imagine some kind of alternatives, but capitalism is believed, according to this “realism”, to be the best *possible* system (Ibid, 2), and all its discontents are thought to be simply unavoidable as a part of human nature or as one of the laws of nature. Everything that does

not correspond to this imaginary capitalistic “human nature” is either understood as naïve utopia (Ibid, 16) or not supposed to be viable and thought to only escalate these discontents. In short, it seems that there is no alternative to capitalism (Ibid, 8).

This non-alternativeness is perfectly reflected in apocalyptic movies (Ibid, 1-4). Even in the fictional universe, it can be seen that this imaginable humanity, even when it is on the brink of extinction, continues to re-enact the same capitalist and market relations which are present nowadays; they continue to sustain the current way of living and behaving even when it makes completely no sense (Ibid, 1).

As capitalism is thought to be immovable or inherent for humanity, it becomes “easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism” (Jameson 2003, 76). If individuals acknowledge that capitalism leads to the end of humanity, but also that capitalism cannot be replaced by any other mode of production, then there is no alternative to the apocalypse and human fate can be only accepted. Therefore, by deriving humans from collective power to change the present, capitalist mode of production derives them from power to choose their future – and, therefore, they encounter the future as something completely alien to them.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Alienation from the future**

#### **3.1. The time is out of joint**

As the capitalist mode of production alienates individuals from common activity and from the world, which is built by this activity, it makes them see this world as acting by itself and as independent from their choices and actions – in short, as an object alien to them. In this subchapter, I demonstrate that modern perceptions of time, whether concerning the hegemony of the present or the unprecedented character of the future, can also be explained by developing Marx’s theory of alienation and by applying it to temporality and historicity. I argue that if the world is seen as impossible to consciously change, then the future of this world is also not to be decided by the people, because acting towards the future requires starting with changes in the present – hence, capitalism also alienates humans from the future. When they cannot imagine anything beyond the present, the future is not possible to consciously build. The existing future is then seen as being out of their control, as coming from outside human history, and as independent from their actions, which makes it seem inevitable and hence acceptable. Humans then respond to the coming catastrophe not with actions, but with resignation and fatalism.

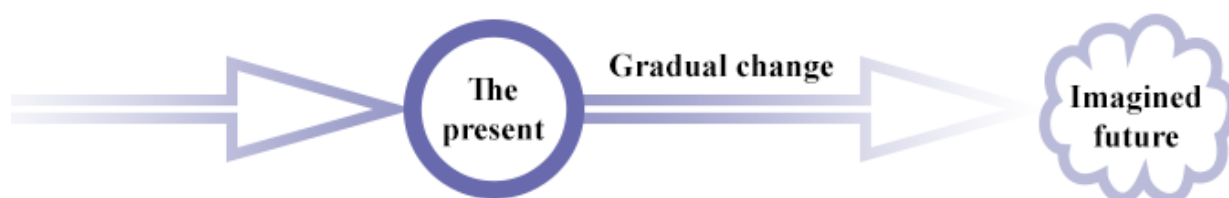
The future, just like the present, is the result of combined human activity to which each individual contributes. It is continuously being created by human labor and is a fruit of it. However, in order for some certain future to be consciously built, people’s efforts should be consciously combined under one goal. As the future is shared – humans are going to live in it together – the vision of this future is also to be shared in order to direct the shared effort towards it. In short, individuals have to see themselves as participants of some greater story and to act accordingly.

According to Zoltan Simon, the role of a “feasible stories to act upon” belongs to historical narratives (Simon 2018, 106). Such narratives enable humans to give history some kind of sense (Ibid, 106) – they unite the past, the present and the imaginable but believable future, which may be possible to build (Ibid, 116). Simultaneously, as these narratives provide sense to shared history, they are also meant to be shared. Action in the present is then seen as one’s participation in this shared process, as taking part in making history. Narratives simultaneously require some degree of human unity and amplify this unity by the sense of common action and common goal. Examples of such narratives can be seen in the Hegelian idea of movement towards freedom, which played a significant role in

liberation movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Different political ideologies have also provided, according to Wendy Brown, their own political narratives like those of progress and democratization (Brown 2015, 94), of building a better future (like communism) which are also significant examples of such greater stories. However, both Brown and Simon admit that such narratives have now become less believable and less powerful: “It has become difficult to tell stories in order to facilitate desired future outcomes, regardless of the grandiosity of the stories” (Simon 2018, 111). I argue that the decline of narratives and the impossibility to create new ones can also be attributed to alienation from the present, the future and from one another.

A shared story is a bridge connecting the present with the desired future: the endpoint of the story <...> lies in a future outcome and future fulfillment as indicated or foreshadowed by the already outlined development of past and present states of affairs (Ibid, 108). However, if the goal is to build such a bridge, three conditions are required. The first of them is the ability to imagine the “feasible future outcome” (Ibid, 106) which is different from the present and which it is believable to build. The presence of such a future gives a direction in which individuals can move and act accordingly; it is hardly possible to build a “bridge” into nowhere.

The second condition is the possibility of “change for the better in human affairs <...> in the form of the course of history” (Ibid, 107), so people have to be able to change the present towards the desired outcome. While building the future, they always start in the present – and they act within it while moving towards the future. If they are building a bridge, the point from which they have to start is getting closer and closer to the future each day. However, the world has to be seen as something which they can influence; they have to recognize that the world is being created and shaped by us in order to feel that they can change it and build a better one.



Thirdly, individuals need to recognize the inherently collective character this future-creating process and to feel somehow united with other humans” participating <...> in an effort to move history in a certain direction” (Ibid). Each participant of this process has to

recognize and determine his contributions toward the common future. Finally, people have to recognize their collective world-creative powers in order to see what and how they can do, so that the future which they imagine is believable and changes in the present are seen as doable.

As it has been shown in chapter I, the estranged character of labor alienates individuals from each other, from themselves and from their activity (Marx 1978, 74-77). Alienation from individual activity makes it impossible to determine what one contributes to the common future; the alienation from other people prevents both recognizing the collective character of human labor and the collective creation of the world, and, hence, of the common future. As individuals are alienated from this collective process, they hence do not feel how this shared labor unites them and they feel atomized. The world, which is being created by humans, is seen as independent from their actions as the collective powers which govern it are masked and are seen as forces independent from the humankind. This alienation masks the power to change the world which people collectively possess, and they therefore do not feel any power to influence or to change the world and its future.

As people do not see the powers to create and change the world, this world, as part 2.2 shows, is seen then as being created by some external forces to which their power was given. The state of this world is then recognized as determined by these forces and dictated by them (Marcuse 2007, 75,149), and, as these forces are seen as objective, this state is seen as being a part of the objective order of things, as “empirical fact (or biological, economic...) necessity” (Fisher 2009, 17). If people do not recognize that this world was created by their combined efforts and that its continuous existence depends on their continuous recreation of it, the world is then recognized as being immovable and independent from their efforts and decisions.

If people do not see their ability to change the present, it becomes impossible to imagine the way of changing it. If they believe that the state of the world in the present is determined by some objective principles, it seems that there is no believable alternative to it: the status-quo “occupies the horizons of the thinkable” (Ibid, 8). Without imagining both the alternative and the way to reach it, people cannot imagine the believable future towards which they could act. Individuals, therefore, cannot imagine the future which is different from the present (Ibid, 1-4).

As their imagination of the future is limited by the present state of affairs, their actions in the world-building process are then limited by recreating the present again and

again, which makes the future practically non-existent – it does not possess any distinguishing features, it is not placed outside the present and does not provide any directions for further movement (Fisher 2014, 3): “impression of linear development has given way to a strange simultaneity” (Ibid, 4). Without any “linear” direction, nothing really “new” can be produced as everything revolves around one point of the “now”.

This results in the condition which is called “presentism” (Hartog 2015, 18). Presentism as the characteristics of modern temporality was described by Francois Hartog, who names it one of the regimes of historicity along with ancient and modern. The dominant regime of historicity is determined by people’s orientation in time, by which epoch they use to determine their actions in the present (Ibid, 16-18). The ancient regime of historicity was backward-looking where past events were seen as the most important ones and history was supposed to teach us how to live (Ibid, 73-77). In the modern regime, where narratives of historical dynamics thrive, history was “made in the name of the future”, which was supposed to be the pinnacle of human history (Ibid, 107). However, both regimes have faded, as the past could no longer be the “teacher of life”, and the utopian future no longer existed (Ibid, 108-111). For Hartog, since only the present is left, presentism is characterized by its orientation to the “now”.

According to Hartog, the future under presentism is no longer an imaginary place on the horizon. As the human world is seen as being ruled by some forces and principles which are independent from humans and out of their control, these forces are often seen as acting against humans, and they have to adapt to their movements which are often hardly predictable and are calculable only for a short perspective (Ibid, 201). The future is obscure and consists of different contradictory predictions and prognoses which are short-term oriented as there is no long-term plan. Contradictory prognoses do not provide any direction for historical development as it is impossible to choose one of them to follow: “we no longer choose a single projection, through which we ‘foresee the future,’ but instead we ‘measure the effects of several envisageable futures on the present’” (Ibid, 202). The uncertain character of these prognoses makes individuals cautious and concerned with reinforcing the present against potential risks from the future, leading to “irrational catastrophism” (Ibid) and generating “a sort of defensive withdrawal into the present”, which may “bolster presentism even further” (Ibid, 200).



Hartog’s theory is based on the non-existence of any certain long-term future which explains the absence of historical narratives. Nowadays long-term future is provided by climate change and by other potential catastrophes. Moreover, these catastrophes cannot be avoided by reinforcing the present state of affairs as they are caused by it, and it is too late to simply be cautious. However, this long-term future does not engender any historical narratives. As Simon argues, there is still no shared story to act upon: “the motivation for action no longer derives from a desired best outcome. Societal action today aims at avoiding the worst prospects of unprecedented change, which are characteristically dystopian and apocalyptic” (Simon 2018, 110).

Attempting to explain this contradiction, Simon and Chakrabarty argue that, while the future is probable, it is so unprecedented in scale that people cannot include it into their vision of the greater history and thus no narratives can be based on such future. This future is “unprecedented” in several senses. For Chakrabarty, it means that human-centric history becomes obsolete as this future is too big in scale to comprehend historically: “the current crisis <...> disconnects the future from the past by putting such a future beyond the grasp of historical sensibility” (Chakrabarty 2009, 197). It is impossible to grasp from the human-only point of view, as this change affects the planet as a whole, “destroying the artificial but time-honored distinction between natural and human histories” (Ibid, 206). This distinction prevents humans from imagining the way to deal with the ecological catastrophe by making them see nature as acting independently from humans and against them. This vision also prevents humans from recognizing the scale of world-changing power which they collectively possess, as their activity affects the whole of nature, “and without that knowledge that defies historical understanding there is no making sense of the current crisis that affects us all” (Ibid, 221).

For Simon, while he refers to Chakrabarty’s ideas, this future is “unprecedented” and inherently dystopian “precisely because of the constant threat of losing control” (Simon 2015, 117) over the course of history and because of “threat to the continuation of human



life as we know it” (Ibid). “Future vision of unprecedented change simply defies story form”, it seems to come from the outside of human history as it “cannot simply be conceived of as gradually developing from preceding states of affairs” (Ibid, 113), being thus detached from the past and from the present. Climate change is perceived in a similar way to the potential impact of an asteroid – it has been floating through the void for millennia and then it suddenly falls down whatever one does. The unprecedented scale makes the previous history irrelevant, as “visions of the future take the shape of <...> a change that implies a complete disconnection with preceding past conditions” (Ibid, 109). If the future is disconnected from history, it is then separated from the history-making process: from human actions both in the past and in the present. It makes people feel that they cannot influence it and that their actions in the present cannot affect this future: the best they can do is to try to avoid the worst scenarios, while accepting that the “unprecedented change” is going to happen anyway. Thus, historical narratives cannot be based on the future which resists being included into any consistent story, and “what remains are stories that end in the present and are told from a present point of view” (Ibid, 111) without providing any direction “making history” further. The last men are then living in the end of history while facing the end of times, and the only thing they can do is to try to soften its effects.

But why does this future seem to come from outside of human history? What has brought these apocalyptic futures upon us is neither an external force nor blind fate. Nature surely deserves recognition, but climate change has been created by human collective activity since the beginning of the industrial era, and now humankind has caused “a new geological era, one in which humans act as a main determinant of the environment of the planet” - the Anthropocene (Chakrabarty 2009, 209). Such futures like possible nuclear war or other technological disasters are completely man-made.

What makes nature to be seen as acting independently is the same phenomenon which makes the commodity to seem independent from its producer. As it has been shown in 2.1, nature is shaped by human labor and the shaped form of it is the result of human collective power applied to it (Marx 1978, 75-76), and, as individuals are alienated from their labor, they do not see the result of this labor as being made by them: the “climate change is an unintended consequence of human actions” (Chakrabarty 2009, 221), the latent effect of which they knew nothing (Beck 1992, 34). When people are alienated from the collective creation of the world, they see this process as directed by someone else or by

no one and they may not be able to recognize the existence or the scale of their ability to collectively change the world.

By not recognizing this power in the present, individuals also do not recognize it in the past, and when they encounter the delayed effects of the power which was applied in the past, they cannot trace these effects back to their source. Humans see not themselves acting against their species through nature, but nature as an historical agent acting independently. The past and the present are hence separated from the future because their connection is hidden by the alienation of this collectively created future from its creators – from humans.

This future seems to be too big to deal with because individuals do not feel within themselves such power to change the world now: as the most part of their activity is alienated from humans (Marx 1978, 74), the most part of their power to change the world is also alienated from them and is applied by them unconsciously. With climate change people face the result of the unconsciously applied power which is consequently much bigger than that power that they can consciously apply now. The change which is going to happen seems to be *much beyond* human collective abilities as something which could never be created by the humankind and thus has no base in human history.

However, when people recognize that climate change is man-made and that it has its origins in human history, the situation does not significantly change because they still do not see these demiurgic abilities of their collective conscious activity. What happens then? The apocalyptic future is then seen as being created by some entity, for example, by capitalism: it is not humans who pollute the planet, but the system (Moore 2017, 3). The system is then seen as having more power than humans do, and in order to fight climate change, they have to fight against capitalism while what they call “capitalism” is *their everyday activity alienated from them*. However, this mode of production is seen by them as immovable, as based on the objective principles of the world and as having no viable alternatives (Marcuse 2007, 75). If the apocalypse is caused by the system that cannot be replaced, it is then seen as inevitable (Jameson 2003, 76). Even if one does not want to blame capitalism, but does not see nature as acting by itself either – thus recognizing the man-made character of the climate change – one then tends to blame humanity as species, saying that the destruction of nature is somehow characteristic for humankind (Brosz 2002, 4-6). If destroying the world is inherent to humans, there is no way humans can fight against it.

Hence, people see the apocalyptic future as something overwhelming which they have no power to fight against, and no historical narrative can be created which could let them to act collectively towards a better (in this case, non-catastrophic) future. If the human-made future is seen as overpowering humanity, it is seen as being out of human control. If it is separated both from the past and the present actions, it is unchangeable and thus inevitable, and people have nothing to do but to accept it.

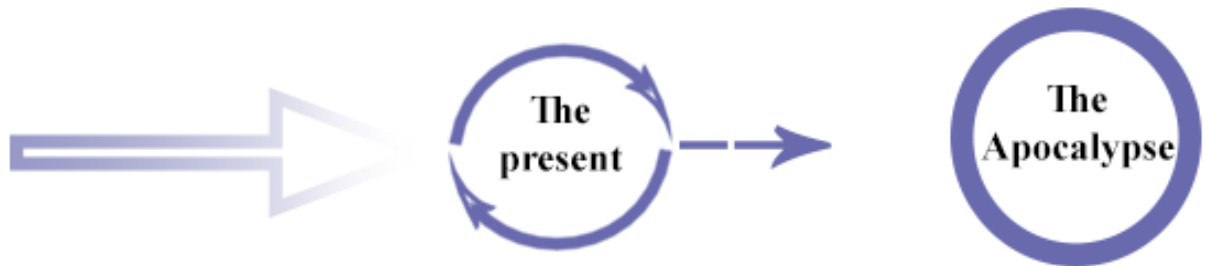
### **3.2. Apocalypse not now**

The capitalist mode of production alienates individuals from the collective creation of their future, making them able to create nothing but the endless present and making the future seem separate from the historical process, independent and inevitable. However, this disjunction of temporality has its own effects which I find to be the last stage in this multi-layered range of effects of the estranged labor. In this subchapter, I argue that alienation from the future has made individuals perceive time as even more warped and shattered. The sense of the endless present which was caused by individual inability to challenge the current states of affairs has caused the feeling that there is no future at all. The certain future of catastrophic threats is combined with this no-future worldview, resulting in the dual character of this future. Humans mostly believe that this future will come, but they still believe in the endless present in which they encapsulate themselves. This future is to come, but always *later, not now*. The apocalypse is hence seen as inevitable, but continuously postponed, which makes it seem less real and makes people feel to have more than enough time left. It is separated not just from the historical process, but from time as such, being perceived as happening in another dimension.

As it has been shown, the existence of the certain future does not make presentism wither away. Instead, presentism is accompanied by a catastrophic future which is looming on the horizon (Simon 2015, 120), leading to the chimerical regime of historicity or sense of temporality where an endless present and the inevitable future coexist. As inability to escape the present and to comprehend the future have similar causes, they may coexist and reinforce each other: “instead of representing mutually exclusive alternatives, the two frameworks can be simultaneously effective” (Hellerma 2020, 13).

As people cannot imagine anything beyond the present, they encapsulate themselves in it by recreating the present again and again. The present, which is seen as the only possible state of affairs (Fisher 2009, 17), does not seem to ever end, as no bridge between it and the future exists due to the absence of any narratives. By continuously recreating the

present, people create the bubble of the “now” which seems to be the reality as such beyond which nothing exists. This bubble moves in time as years pass, but for individuals, it feels mostly the same. Things which are within this bubble are seen as nearly simultaneous, while things outside of it are seen as non-existent or as never going to enter it.



The time is then separated into separate parallel timelines, based on the distinction between “the reality” and “the Real”: “there are two times: the time of so-called reality, and real, or catastrophic, time, which flows irreversibly” (Timofeeva 2014). These timelines are also seen as leading to separate futures as they were described by Jérôme Baschet. Both of imaginary futures, which are described in this chapter, belong to the “reality” timeline – the “expected” future of the inevitable apocalypse, and the copy of the present (Tamm 2020, 453), which Baschet called the “financial future”, which causes people to be stuck in the short-term orientation of capitalist society (Ibid, 454).

The second, “real” timeline leads to the “prognosticable future” – the catastrophe which is predicted by scientists (Ibid, 453). In “reality time,” presentism reigns and does not seem to move anywhere, while the real time moves towards the catastrophe. This future urges people to act as if it was avoidable and preventable, but in order to be affected by it, they have to leave the “reality” of the endless present. Such escape may happen during the catastrophe, when “the Real” enters the “reality” and may be able to shatter the “reality” apart, revealing its illusory character (Fisher 2009, 18) and enabling people to doubt its inevitability and to rethink their way of living (Žižek 2020, 41).

However, while facing this catastrophic alienated future with which individuals do not believe themselves to be able to deal, they envelope themselves in the present even more, as, “living in times when radical and tumultuous events loom on the horizon, we are naturally inclined to avert worst-case scenarios by way of devising strategies geared toward, as it were, extending our present circumstances into the future” (Hellerma 2020, 13). People then continue reinforcing this imaginary bubble by trying to keep their way of living the same as long as possible.

When time passes and the future starts to leak into the present, people encounter the events which signify the gradual arrival of such future – for example, climate anomalies, disasters, pandemics – they strive to return “back to normal”, to start recreating their way of living as fast as possible even if it means to avoid dealing with these catastrophes, just like the dying patient may try to “live the full life” in order to avoid thinking of death when he feels his symptoms getting worse as he does not believe himself to ever recover.

Due to the seeming impenetrability of this imaginary bubble, other dimensions of time seem therefore separated from the present not only historicity-wise (as being independent from it), but also in human perception of temporality. The things how they are now seem to never significantly change (Fisher 2009, 59) – which means never within the “reality time”, as some temporal changes are perceived as being outside of it –, but the future which humans face is totally different from the present (Simon 2015, 109), and they do not see any “gradual development” towards this difference (Ibid, 113) – even when this transfer happens, they perceive parts of the coming future as unreal. The future is seen as inevitably coming, but the process of it becoming actual is absent from human perception. This creates a gap in the timeline which separates individuals from the future – there is no passage of time between now and then.

The catastrophic future is then also seen as being outside of the actual timeline. It is perceived as happening in the parallel dimension outside of the reality and, as the perceived reality is limited by the present, it is never supposed to become real. It is certain but is not supposed to ever come; it is simultaneously inevitable and continuously postponed. As there is no bridge connecting the present with this future, it is always somewhere on the horizon and is always “later, not now”.

This worldview is reminiscent of the actual Apocalypse in Christianity. The religious Apocalypse was believed to certainly happen someday, it was a part of religious cosmology and a part of people’s worldview. The logical behavior if the end of the world and Final Judgment are inevitable would be to get rid of one’s sins and to be saint in order to avoid going to Hell after it, as the physical life matters nothing in the face of the coming eternity. Instead, most people behaved as if the Apocalypse was not real and was never supposed to come. It took place in some parallel mythical dimension of time but not on the actual timeline, also having this dual character of certainty and practical non-existence.

People then perceive the catastrophe as if it belongs solely to the separate dimension of this never-coming future, they “still believe that the worst is yet to come – it is a

perspective, but not a reality” (Timofeeva 2014), and their concentration on this future diverts their attention from the present in which the effects of the coming future are real and in which people have to act: “we look to the future and for the future; we have visions of future catastrophes, and these visions prevent us from grasping the catastrophe of the real, or the real catastrophe, which just happens” (Ibid). This perception also enables the estranged hope for “messianic” salvation, which will somehow prevent this future from happening and let people stay in the present while continuing their ways of living – if the catastrophe always remains in the “future”, there is always a chance that someone will prevent it, even if in reality it may be too late (Ibid).



People then still perceive “the Real” of the catastrophe as being outside of reality and having a spectral character. Until the catastrophe in the “now” is not recognized, it is hardly possible to act against it: “the moment this spectral agent becomes part of our reality (even if it means catching a virus), its power is localized, it becomes something we can deal with (even if we lose the battle)” (Žižek 2020, 110-111). But presentism and capitalist realism reinforce the visible “reality”, preventing people from recognizing the apocalypse as a part of it, from localizing it and from being able to fight against it even if the fight is a desperate one.

As a result, the motivation to take the future into account and to base current actions on its existence decreases when this future is continuously postponed. People then always think to have plenty of time to act – climate change seems to be far away while year 2030, when the tipping point of no return will be passed, is getting closer each day. Hopeless individuals additionally do not believe this future to be preventable as they cannot replace the way of living which leads to it. Therefore, they simultaneously believe this future to be inevitable and act like if it does not exist at all – they continue their way of living without attempting to change it (Žižek 2020, 51).

If the long-term future seems to always be distanced from “now”, it does not matter for humans’ activity in the present and can be neglected. What is left is the short-term

future which is based on the present state of affairs instead of taking the long-term consequences and threats into account. Therefore, individual alienation from the future, created by the current mode of production, makes people completely focus on the short-term future and, therefore, on short-term profits instead of trying to change the world in a better way in order to avoid catastrophe. People then continue recreating the present while also continuing to create the apocalyptic future by their activity until the end of the world finally comes.

## **Chapter 4**

### **What can be done**

In the previous chapters I have described the possible cause of both estranged inactivity (and severely limited activity) and the fatalistic acceptance with which people face pending catastrophes. However, if the source of the problem is localized, but is also shown as unchangeable, such analysis may possess zero or negative value, as it may strengthen the sense that nothing really can be done. In order to avoid such an occasion, in this chapter I attempt to provide possible solutions to this deadlock.

First of all, I have to mark the direction in which working solutions may be located. The problem is that one cannot effectively suggest removing the source of alienation – the estranged character of labor. As it has been shown, alienation actively undermines people's ability to change the system or makes them unwilling to change it. As it also was demonstrated, the main problem is estranged inactivity which is caused and stimulated by capitalism. People, who want to do something against the catastrophe, either feel their actions to be meaningless and not worth doing, or are calmed by the sense that the catastrophe is still far enough away and things may solve themselves somehow.

As alienation also prevents people from making sense of their actions, believing that the catastrophe may be prevented or, in the opposite case, from recognizing that they should not postpone their actions and hope for the best, instead of proposing concrete actions I suggest possible philosophical solutions which might motivate people to act even if they don't feel that such actions are meaningful. I admit that possible solutions may be found in other philosophical theories – for example, in Hannah Arendt's theory of politics and collective action, in Habermas's theory of communicative action or in Baschet's idea of inventing a new temporality. However, such an investigation is beyond the scope of this thesis and may be the subject for future research. Hence, I limit myself to an analysis of two philosophical responses to alienation.

#### **4.1. Stoicism in troubling times**

In this subchapter I analyze the first of the possible solutions which comes from the ideas of ancient Stoics – such as Marcus Aurelius, Seneca and Epictetus. This approach was chosen for my analysis because it is often invoked with the ongoing pandemic and climate change (Gindin 2020). Stoic philosophy is focused on motivating people to act according to what they believe to be good. According to the Stoics, one should not be focused on the



effects of one's activity. Instead, "the good-will of the benefactor is the fountain of all benefits; it is the benefit itself <...> the obligation rests in the mind, not in the matter" (Seneca in Hazlitt 1984, 52).

The virtue of action and inner peace are the main values and goals for one's life. In the case of climate change, this approach enables individual actions which are prevented by the sense that one's activity does not bring any visible result. One may, for example, care for the environment and reduce one's carbon footprint even if one believes that it will not change the future. One has to be a good person and behave in a corresponding way in the present without paying much attention to the future, no matter how close of distant it is: "if you are never sad, if no hope disturbs your mind with anticipation of the future, if by day and night the condition of your spirit is even and unvarying, alert and happy with itself, then you have reached the high point of human good" (Seneca 2010, 92).

However, there are some insufficiencies with Stoicism. First of all, the accent on action as something self-valuable is combined with the acceptance of evils which one cannot deal with: "if I cannot be found doing any such great things, yet, at least, I would be doing what I am incapable of being restrained from, what is given me to do, correcting myself, improving that faculty which makes use of the appearances of things, to procure tranquility" (Epictetus in Hazlitt 1984, 94). There is always something bad in the world, and one is not able to change it. Thus, in order to keep his inner peace, one should avoid thinking about it and simply live the good life: "When circumstances force you to some sort of distress, quickly return to yourself. Do not stay out of rhythm for longer than you must: you will master the harmony the more by constantly going back to it" (Marcus Aurelius 2006, 47).

Hence, one's action, while being valuable is such, should still not be wasted on something which is beyond one's power – concentrating on one's actions, one shall "determine that only what lies in our own power is good or evil" (Ibid, 54). This philosophy does not encourage one to change the world or to put one's efforts against the catastrophe which seems independent from one's actions (Epictetus in Hazlitt 1984, 108). Therefore, even if Stoicism enables individual action, it does so partially. One's actions are still limited by the status-quo even if this state of affairs is harmful (Ibid, 100) – the encouraged actions may be not radical enough.

Refusal to pay much attention to the future may have its shortcomings too. While it helps to overcome both despair and estranged hope, it also detaches one's actions in the

present from the future: “for why is it necessary to invite misfortunes, to anticipate what must be suffered soon enough when it occurs, and ruin the present with fear for the future? And it is undoubtedly foolish to be unhappy now because you are going to be unhappy sooner or later” (Seneca 2010, 40). One acts despite the apocalypse, but not really against it: one shall accept that the worst will probably happen and get ready to stoically endure the catastrophe: “the wise man is accustomed to future evils, and what others have made light by long suffering he makes light by long meditation” (Ibid, 128). One is still supposed to act decently, but without urgency and rapidness, as he has already accepted his fate and does not let it to disturb his tranquility. If “business-as-usual” decent care for the environment is not enough to avoid the catastrophe, unwillingness to accept the catastrophic future may encourage individual to put extra efforts into preventing it. The Stoical approach seems to be lacking this kind of motivation, but one would still be liberated from the sense of guilt, from numbness, anxiety and cynicism.

Moreover, Stoic philosophy is oriented to the individual: one should rely only on one’s principles without expecting the right behavior from the others (Marcus Aurelius 2006, 92). Of course, one should still care about other humans, but he should not worry too much about motivating them to act too. If one is not willing to behave as a good man, it is not worth it to try convincing him – you may find someone who is more open to Stoicism later (Ibid, 56). Inner peace should not be disturbed – the numbness of the others is accepted just as the existence of evil: “it is our duty to do good to men and tolerate them. But in so far as some are obstacles to my proper work, man joins the category of things indifferent to me - no less than the sun, the wind, a wild animal” (Ibid, 41).

If one cannot change the situation completely, it’s better not to think about it. Therefore, Stoic philosophy does not overcome one’s alienation from others but motivates the individual to care about others only if it serves his or her virtue. While alienated from others, one still does not recognize the power which humans collectively possess. Hence, it still does not make it possible to change the world significantly, and, if it is indeed required in order to avoid catastrophe, Stoic philosophy may be not enough to do it.

#### **4.2. Rage, rage against the dying of the light**

In this subchapter, I suggest another possible philosophical solution to people’s unwillingness to act, which comes from existentialist philosophy. This choice would seem less unusual if one compared the effects which are made on human life both by the apocalypse and by individual death – and people’s responses to them. I argue that these

effects are similar enough to expect existentialist ideas to be useful when applied to the global catastrophe.

As demonstrated by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, one's inevitable mortality renders action meaningless – whatever one does, it is all futile in the end: “That idea that ‘I am’, – my way of acting as if everything has a meaning <...> – all that is given the lie in vertiginous fashion by the absurdity of a possible death” (Camus 1979, 56).

According to Camus, there are several possible responses to one's mortality and to this situation. The most common of them is to neglect the fact that one inevitably dies – people live as if they are immortal, as if they always have plenty of time: “we live on the future : ‘tomorrow’, ‘later on’, ‘when you have made your way’ <...> such irrelevancies are wonderful, for, after all, it's a matter of dying” (Ibid, 19-20). One engages then into meaningless activities, postponing authentic life to the very end, until it is too late and death is near: “by the horror that seizes him, he recognizes his worst enemy. Tomorrow, he was longing for tomorrow, whereas everything in him ought to reject it” (Ibid, 20).

Another response is the recognition and acceptance of one's death and of the consequent meaninglessness of one's life. One is then unmotivated to do anything and simply gives up – such recognition leads to nothing but depression or suicide. In most cases one may return to the first possibility, trying to forget about this realization and to live as usual: “what follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening. At the end of the awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery” (Ibid, 19).

Hence, Camus's philosophy was directed to making people act even if everything seems meaningless without falling into self-deception. Therefore, the third way of responding to death suggested by Camus is “one of the only coherent philosophical positions” (Ibid, 54) – the continuous revolt against death. One is supposed to accept his inevitable fate, but without surrendering – one shall still engage into life even if he affirms that it is meaningless: “Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully <...> It challenges the world anew every second” (Ibid). The meaninglessness of life struggles is then seen as an open space for creating new meanings despite and against death, as “the absurd has meaning only in so far as it is not agreed to” (Ibid, 35).

One faces one's mortality and responds with decisive negation: “that struggle implies a total absence of hope (which has nothing to do with despair), a continual rejection (which must not be confused with renunciation), and a conscious dissatisfaction (which

must not be compared to immature unrest)” (Ibid, 34). Death is recognized as the biggest injustice in human existence, as the “supreme abuse” (Ibid, 85), and, as such, it deserves to be met with a “good fight,” even if it is unavoidable – in the name of justice and the decency of human life.

It can be seen that the two common responses to both death and the apocalypse do not differ much from each other. The apocalypse, if it is perceived as inevitable, may be somehow equated with death – but it is collective death, not a just a personal one. If one dies, life still goes on; however, with climate change, the world may also come to an end, so the level of the absurdity of such struggle is higher. If such an equation is made, it is possible to apply Camus’s existential revolt to this situation. The apocalypse and death are unjust in the same way – people keep building both the world and their personal lives while the apocalyptic future makes them meaningless.

The disadvantage of the existentialist approach is that it works only for those who do not believe that the catastrophe may be prevented. Optimists, who do not act because they believe that the catastrophe is far away and may be solved in time, could be motivated to act by Stoical philosophy, but in order to be affected by existentialism, they should first lose their hope – so I consider this attitude to be only partially applicable and will focus on how it works for those in despair.

On the level of individual action, this attitude works even better than Stoic philosophy. If one is going to rebel against the injustice of the catastrophe, one is supposed not simply to behave as a good person while accepting things which one cannot change. This revolt is neither the neglect of the apocalypse, like the Stoics propose, nor the acceptance of it. Instead, it is the recognition and continuous *negation* by one’s activity: “metaphysical rebellion is the movement by which man protests against his condition and against the whole of creation. <...> the metaphysical rebel declares that he is frustrated by the universe” (Camus 1991, 23). Therefore, one’s efforts should not be put aside but placed against the apocalypse. One is not limited by “inner peace” or by considerations of what is possible to accomplish. If any struggle becomes absurd, it may be not restricted by limitations of the socio-economic order as this order is also absurd and meaningless once the apocalypse is accepted in an existentialist way: “the absurd man feels released from everything outside that passionate attention crystallizing in him” (Camus 1979, 58).

When the finality of the apocalypse is realized no matter how far this event is perceived to be – by recognizing this finality, one faces the “real” and incorporates it into

reality, into the “now”. One’s alienation from the future should not prevent one from acting. Hence, this attitude may enable a potentially limitless variety of individual actions: “outside of that single fatality of death, everything, joy or happiness is liberty. A world remains of which man is the sole master. What bound him was the illusion of another world” (Ibid, 106). Moreover, according to Camus, revolt actually overcomes the alienation between men. When revolting against death (or, in this case, against the apocalypse), one creates new values and gives new meanings to the world: “it is not only a question of pure and simple negation. In both cases, in fact, we find a value judgment in the name of which the rebel refuses to approve the condition in which he finds himself” (Camus 1991, 23).

These meanings are what people have in common and produce together: “the rebel demands that this value should be clearly recognized in himself because he knows or suspects that, without this principle, crime and disorder would reign throughout the world. An act of rebellion on his part seems like a demand for clarity and unity” (Ibid). As environmental catastrophe is globally shared, meanings and values should be given not only to individual life, but also to the whole world – therefore, revolt against the apocalypse may also enable and stimulate collective action.

The main difference is that, even if both death and the apocalypse are perceived as inevitable, man-made catastrophes still can be avoided. While creation of collective values makes people act together, they may be able to recognize the existence and the scale of their world-creative collective potential, therefore, breaking the alienation from the world. This, in its turn, may make them recognize that the apocalypse can be prevented. While such realization may dissolve the existentialist attitude, if the ability to change and to save the world is seen, it would no longer be necessary as people would be motivated to act anyway.

Therefore, it is possible to conclude that for those in despair, an existentialist approach may be much more fruitful than Stoicism, because it is theoretically able to overcome the effects of alienation. However, it is not applicable to those who are unmotivated to act because of their estranged hope. Those people are more effectively affected by Stoicism, which can encourage their actions. Even if these two philosophies can hardly be combined – one of them neglects the future and is limited by one’s vision of his own abilities, while the other is directed against the future and is fueled by its inevitability, encouraging seemingly meaningless actions – they may be applied separately to people with differing views on the future catastrophe, motivating all of them to act.

## Conclusion

The aim of the present thesis was to demonstrate that the absence of an adequate response to future catastrophes, such as climate change, is caused by the capitalist mode of production and could be explained by elaborating Karl Marx's theory of alienation. I began by unpacking Marx's own concept and showing that according to him alienation is inherent to the capitalist system as it is caused by exploitative labor. Such labor alienates humans from their productive activity, as this activity is decided and directed by someone else. This, in its turn, alienates individuals from other participants of collective labor. As the world as such is the fruit of collective human activity, people are then alienated from the world and from society as a whole.

I have complemented Marx's work with Wendy Brown's analysis of neoliberalism, demonstrating that, even if previously such world-creation could be exercised through politics, now it is not the case as the sphere of politics was mostly from the economization of every sphere of human life, and people thus were deprived of access to their collective creative power completely. When considering responses to the coming catastrophe, one then cannot apply to this collective power which could reshape the society and change the mode of production in order to avoid it. One is then limited by proposing individual actions, which are not enough even when performed by a large amount of people as they lack cooperation and perceive something which could be done only collectively as impossible.

In addition, I demonstrated that estranged labor also alienates people from the world which they are creating and recreating in their everyday activity. First of all, it alienates them from the external world, which is rendered into mere source of resources by the capitalist system, making people distanced from nature both physically and ontologically. People then are not free to know and to decide whether or not they harm nature and recognition of the true scale of this harm is complicated for them – just as recognition of potential goods which can be done against this harm. One simply sees that he cannot stop the destruction of nature and that his activity is meaningless even if he sacrifices his way of living or even his life as such to it.

Further, I have shown that the human world and the society are also perceived as independent from human actions, as determined by external forces, such as economic laws, and as immovable. If one sees capitalism as rationally determined, one cannot challenge this system as any alternatives would look naïve, inferior or utopian. Capitalism thus represents itself as the inevitable part of reality, which makes people abandon attempts to

change or replace it even if it is required in order to save the world. One is then left with acting within the current mode of production, which severely limits his ability to influence the course of events.

Moreover, I have applied Marx's theory to the problem of modern temporality and demonstrated that alienation makes people lose control over their own future. If one cannot change the present, he is unable to move towards a certain future. If the present is the objectively determined state of affairs, one cannot imagine the future which is different from it, which makes individuals feel stuck in the endless present. Even when a certain future is encountered, it is perceived as separate from human history as people do not recognize their role in its creation – and they, therefore, do not see any power to fight against it, as they cannot change anything in the “now”. Presentism is thus not undermined by the existing future, which leads to the chimerical regime of historicity: as no gradual change towards the future is seen, it is then separated from the present with the gap in timescale.

This warping of people's perception of time makes the future seem both inevitable and postponed into eternity, so it cannot motivate them to act in the present – there is always much time to act, but there is also nothing they can do. Moreover, the apocalypse is then seen as belonging solely to this separate dimension of the future, which prevents the recognition of the fact that it is already starting nowadays. Thus, people are both deprived of the power to do anything which they consider to be effective against the catastrophic future and unmotivated to seek for solutions, being left with recreating the same state of affairs until the apocalypse, whether they hope for the best, thinking that they have enough time for a miracle to happen, or surrender to despair, resignation and fatalism.

Finally, I have analyzed two possible philosophic responses to this situation, as some schools of thought may affect people's attitude and motivate them to act despite alienation. The first response is provided by the Stoics, who argue that one should act according to one's principles and one's notion of goodness no matter what the result. This approach is shown to be fitting for everyone and enabling individual actions, even though significantly limited. The other response comes from the existentialist philosophy of Albert Camus, as the apocalypse may be equated with death, making this school of thought applicable to it. Camus's existential revolt, if directed against the catastrophe, can both enable individual activity and overcome alienation from the future by including the “real” of the apocalypse into the reality, thus replacing the numb acceptance of it with the

directive of struggle against it. Moreover, it breaches the alienation from other men and reopens the possibility of collective action, letting people rediscover their collective potentialities to find a way to prevent global catastrophe. However, existentialism can encourage only those who are already desperate enough – hence, in order to motivate both inactive optimists and desperate fatalists to act effectively, both of these philosophies may be applied and encouraged.



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## **Abstract**

Alienation and Resignation: Why don't we act against apocalyptic futures?

Humanity faces apocalyptic futures which are the product of the current socio-economic system. However, the present response is insufficient. This thesis analyzes what prevents people from effectively acting against future catastrophes. In order to do so, I use climate change as the main example and employ a Marxist critique of capitalism. I argue that the insufficiency of current responses to catastrophic futures can be explained by Marx's notion of *alienation* which is inherent to the current mode of production. In first three chapters I demonstrate different consequences of estranged labor. First, it makes people alienated not only from the fruits of their labor, but also from other people, thus preventing collective actions. Secondly, it disconnects individuals from the world which they collectively produce. Thirdly, it alienates individuals from a collectively produced future, affecting their perception of temporality and making them see the future as inevitable but eternally postponed. Thus, they become discouraged to act against the catastrophes which they collectively cause. In the fourth chapter I propose two philosophical solutions to this deadlock – Stoicism, which enables individual activity, and existentialism, which motivates people to act even if their struggle is absurd.

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